

# An Olmec Figure at Dumbarton Oaks

Elizabeth P. Benson

DUMBARTON OAKS STUDIES IN PRE-COLUMBIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY | 8



STUDIES IN PRE-COLUMBIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY NUMBER EIGHT

AN OLMEC FIGURE  
AT DUMBARTON OAKS

ELIZABETH P. BENSON

---

Dumbarton Oaks      Trustees for Harvard University      Washington, D.C. 1971

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to William R. Tyler, Michael Coe, C. William Clewlow, Jr., Peter David Joralemon, and Barbara Braun, and I am particularly indebted to Richard Amt for his able and patient efforts with a 35-mm. camera.

© 1971

Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University,  
Washington, D.C.

All rights reserved.

Library of Congress catalog number 70-184640

ISBN 978-0-88402-035-6





Fig. 1 Olmec diopside figure in the Robert Woods Bliss Collection, Dumbarton Oaks. 16.3 centimeters high.

# An Olmec Figure at Dumbarton Oaks

## THE FIGURE

IN THE DUMBARTON OAKS COLLECTIONS, there is a seated diopside figure (Fig. 1), 16.3 centimeters high, by 9.3 centimeters wide, by 5.7 centimeters in depth. This piece is said to be one of a large cache of stone objects found at Arroyo Pesquero in southern Veracruz.<sup>1</sup> Apparently the majority of the objects in this find were masks or celts, many of which are incised. The Dumbarton Oaks figure is seated in a pose common in Olmec carving, cross-legged, with the right leg in front of the left. The hands rest on the knees in relaxed fists. The arms are not separated from the body (as is the case with many seated Olmec figures), but are cut solidly with the chest and thigh. The figure faces directly forward and, like most Olmec representations, it is neckless. It undoubtedly is a male.

Unlike most full-round Olmec figures, this one is richly dressed. He wears an elaborate headdress—a helmet with a plaque-like extension at the top. There is a cleft at the back (Fig. 2), at a right angle to the face, that appears to be part of the headdress rather than part of the head. At the rear, this cleft is deeply grooved on the transverse and vertical axes, so that four bars are formed (Fig. 3). The headdress extension, which has approximately parallel sides (Fig. 2) and is a centimeter or a little more in depth, rises toward the back of the head and is almost as wide as the helmet (Fig. 1).

<sup>1</sup> This may be the site identified by Stirling (personal communication) as Los Soldados. It is also known as Las Choapas.

Fig. 2 Side view of the Dumbarton Oaks figure.



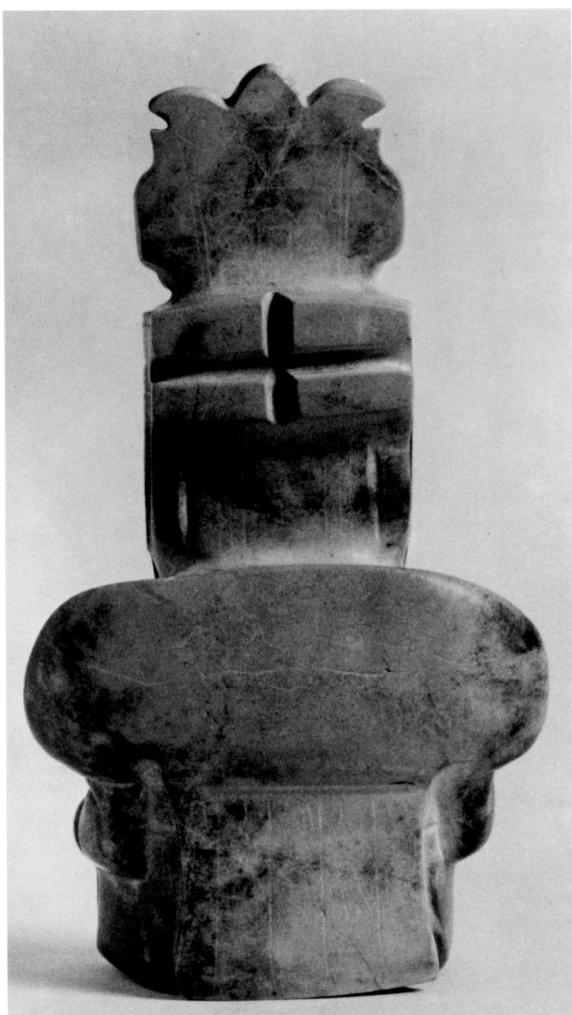


Fig. 3 Rear view of the Dumbarton Oaks figure.

The figure wears a belt and a kilt, as well as a cape of feathers that covers only the shoulders in front, but, in the back, reaches from the shoulders to the waist, where it meets—or has appended—a “tail” that extends to the base of the figure. The cape projects at the neck to give an almost hunchback look (Fig. 2).

The head, even without the headdress extension, is as tall as the rest of the body. Although the piece has an overall symmetry, the conventionalized face is given liveliness by slight asymmetry (Fig. 4). The

figure's left eye is somewhat larger than his right; his right nostril is slightly more bulbous than his left; and the lower lip is virtually missing at the right corner, and seems to pull toward the left. The almond-shaped eyes are tilted upward toward the outer corners. A brow ridge is indicated. The nose is broad from the front view, but slightly aquiline in profile. The open mouth, showing a slight gum ridge, is carved in typical Olmec rising curves.

Nostrils are drilled, and there is a hole through the septum. Drill pits show in the corners of the mouth. The ears are covered by rectangular ear protectors, but

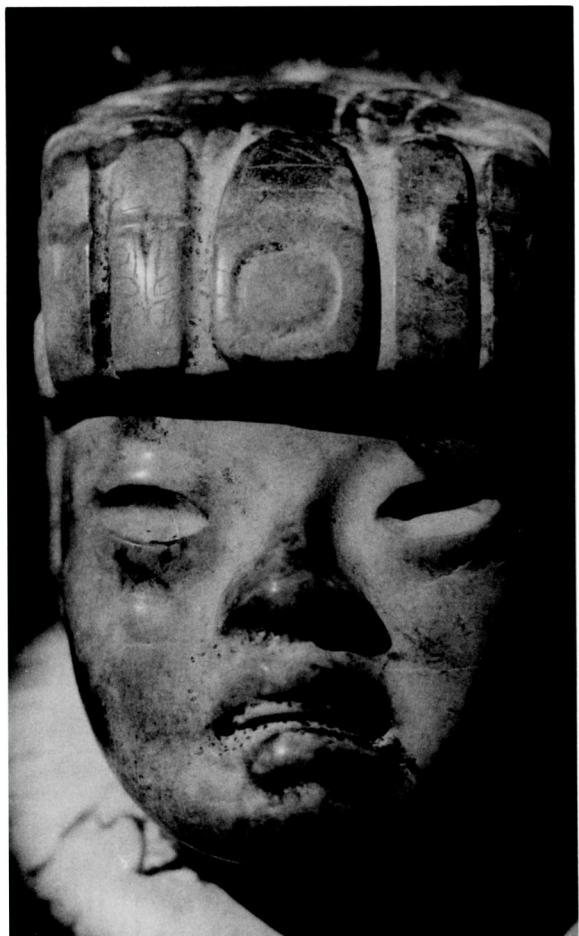


Fig. 4 Face of the Dumbarton Oaks figure.



Fig. 5 Front of the headdress extension.

below these is a faint indication of the ear lobe with a hole drilled from each side to form a pinpoint hole in the center (Fig. 2). Each hand also has a small drilling between thumb and forefinger. The fingers are defined; the toes are not.

The workmanship and condition of the piece are extraordinary. Notable in the carving style is the alternation of rounded and angular surfaces. The edges of the headdress extension, the four bars formed by the cleft, the bottom of the tail, and the shallowly represented legs, for example, are quite sharp-edged, whereas the curving front of the headdress and the arms are rounded. The very subtle modeling of the face is in contrast to the more schematized carving of the other surfaces. The stone is gray, and varies in

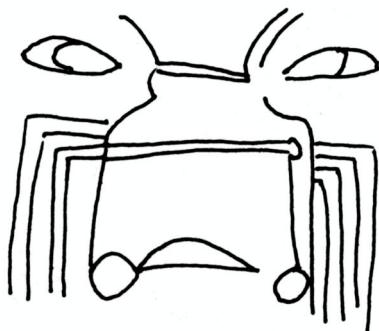


Fig. 6 Drawing showing facial lines on the headdress extension.

color from almost-white to almost-black. The whole piece is quite highly polished, although the stone takes a polish better in some places than in others. The figure's right fist is broken; otherwise, it is in perfect condition except for some surface cracks. There are some lichens or incrustations in the crevices, as well as a tarry black deposit.

#### LOW-RELIEF CARVING AND INCISING

THE FACE is innocent of decoration, but on other parts of the body there is a wealth of low-relief carving and incision, in which a very large part of the vocabulary of Olmec motifs is represented. Some of the incising is so subtle that it is almost impossible to detect

with the naked eye, but is somewhat crude when viewed under the microscope.

Centered in the front of the headdress extension (Fig. 5) is a square face or mask in low relief. This mask has a cleft head or headdress, the cleft leading down to an oval, at either side of which are two leaf-shaped elements. The mask has incised almond eyes with pupils, a flat broad nose with a groove across the bridge, a large squarish upper lip, a gum ridge, and two holes drilled at the mouth corners. There are vertical lines incised in the cheeks (Fig. 6), which turn toward the nose at a right angle; these lines form two right-angle parallel bands on each cheek. At either side of this mask is a "knuckleduster" (Fig. 5), composed of an inner bracket, or ear, in low relief, with a faintly

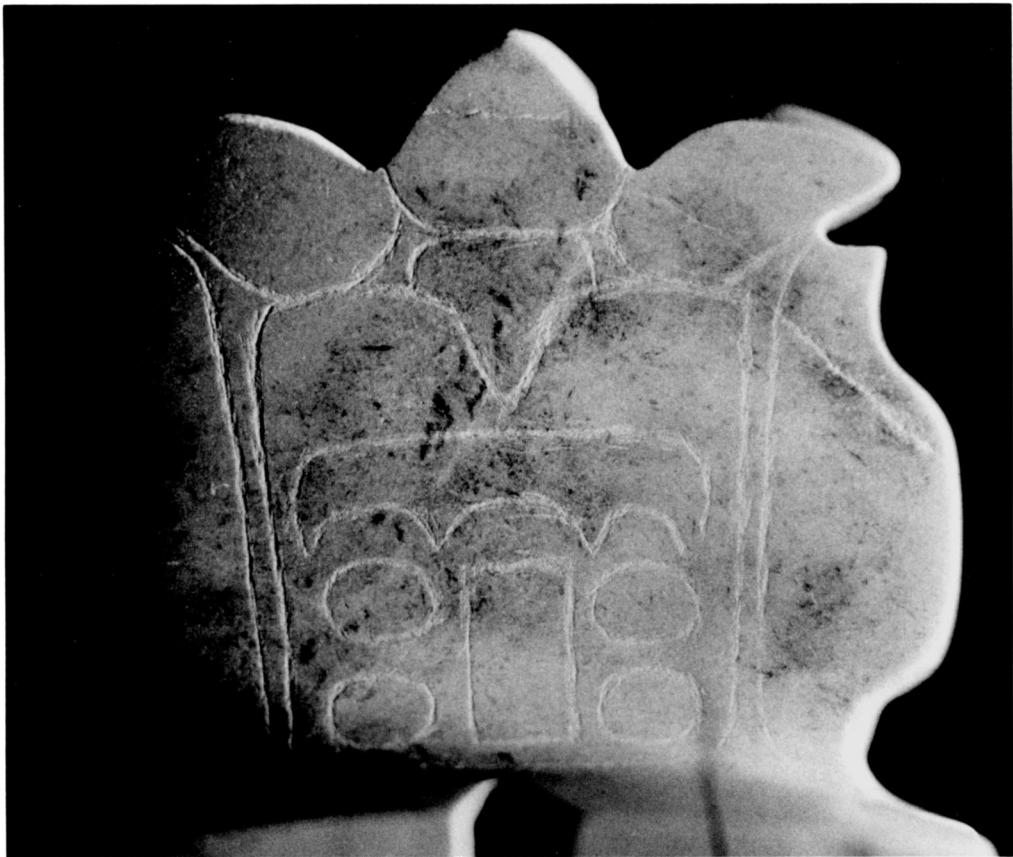


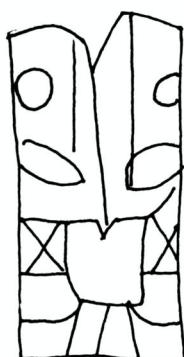
Fig. 7 Back of the headdress extension.



Fig. 8 (top) Front of the head, showing feathered brow at top of helmet.

Fig. 9 (center) Front of the helmet, showing the four masks and central "eye."

Fig. 10 (bottom) Drawing of the four masks on the helmet.



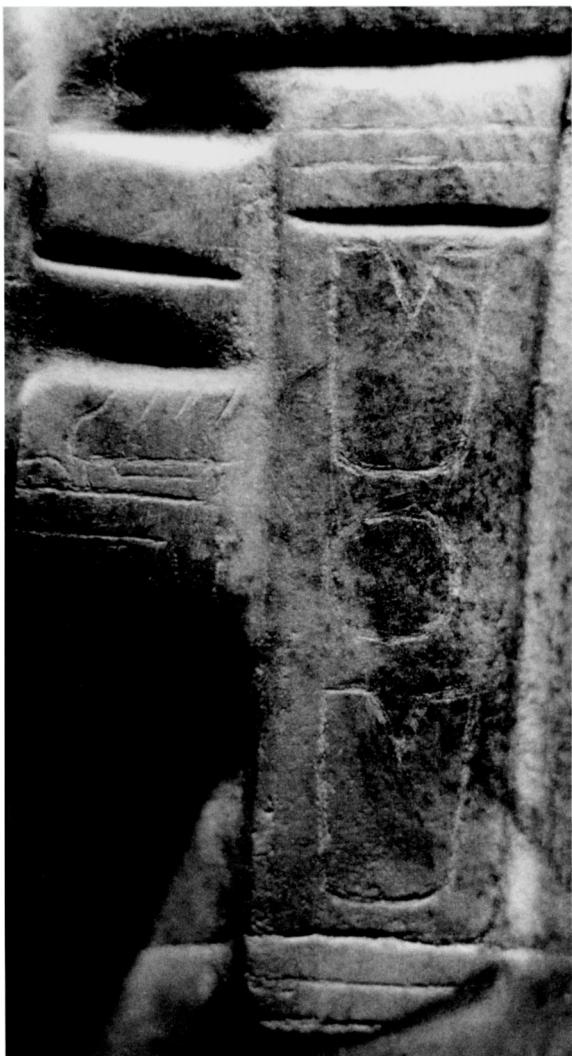


Fig. 11 Ear protector and birdhead.

incised semicircle inside, and an outer frame with an incised wavelike line. This wave motif is the same pattern of incising that is used to indicate feathers on the back of the cape. On each of the three elements at the top of the headdress extension is an incised design of a profile birdhead. Each has a crest, a round eye, a cere, and a long curved beak. The center head is more compressed than the other two; its differences are undoubtedly in part due to the shape of the space, but,

unlike the other two, this one has beardlike hatching below the eye.

On the back of the headdress extension (Fig. 7) a complex of elements is incised. Within a cleft form, there is a four-pronged version of the downturned E over four dots and a vertical central bar. Above this, the outlines of the three finials at the top form what Joralemon (1971) terms "vegetation symbols" or "tripartite maize" (cf. also Coe 1965: 757). There is a small triangular element between the cleft and the center of the three top elements that fits like a plug into the cleft, and is roughly the shape of a grain of corn. There is also a sort of frame at the sides of the mask that suggests (but does not define at the lower part) a U-shaped bracket.

In the front, at the top of the helmet (Fig. 8), there are, carved in low relief, two feathered brows, probably representing the brows of an owl or the crest of a bird. Below these, in a band at the front, are five carved motifs, directly above the figure's brow (Fig. 9). The central motif is a circle which may represent the eye of a bird; around the circle is a frame with hatching. Similar hatching, or feathering, appears in other places on the figure. Above this slightly squared frame is a glyphlike motif, the top part of which is a double semicircle with a diagonal band on it; below this is a wider horizontal band (which begins at the inside of the frame at one side and overlaps the frame on the other side), then another diagonal band, parallel to the upper one. At either side of this central motif, umbrellaed by the feathered brow, are two incised masks. Each of the four is surmounted by a glyphlike design with a rounded top, around the inside of which are hatchings, the center hatchings being extended to form a tab going up into the concave area between the semicircle and the feathered brow; in the lower part of the design is a double-merlon motif.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest a change in the use of the term "step motif," which has been used by Coe (1965) and Joralemon (1970) for a two-toothed crenelation; it would seem more appropriate to call this a "double merlon."

The four incised masks on the helmet (Fig. 10) are all different, although each has a cleft head and almond eyes. The mask at the viewer's far left has a vertical rectangular element at the base of the cleft, and vertical rectangular elements at the sides that go down through the eyes. The mouth has crossed bands in a lozenge. The second head from the left has a circle above each eye and a vertical line coming from the top of the mask to the inner corner of the eye (in one case, the line meets the eye somewhat in front of the corner) so that each circle is within a rectangle. Another vertical line extends from the cleft element down to the mouth, which is a cleft element with three vertical lines below it. These lines may represent a beard, or something pendant from the cleft element. There is a crossed-bands element at either side of the mouth. To the right of the central circle is a mask with a double-banded vertical zone down the center. This mask has

a series of parallel diagonal bands: one across each side of the "brow," at either side of the cleft; one coming from the corner of each eye, across the cheek; and another from one side of the mouth to the lower left corner of the face. The upper and middle bands form pairs, with the single band by itself below. The diagonals also form bands across the whole face, interrupted by the central vertical panel. The mouth is teardrop-shaped. At the far right is a mask with a cleft element going through each eye like an "eye plaque." There is a jack-o-lantern mouth with pointed teeth (representing tooth deformation?). Between the mouth and the bottom of the face are two flowerlike forms possibly pendant from the mouth.

At each side of the helmet, in a line with the masks, is a small incised profile birdhead very like those on the headdress-extension finials (Fig. 11). Above each birdhead are two horizontal bars with a deep groove be-

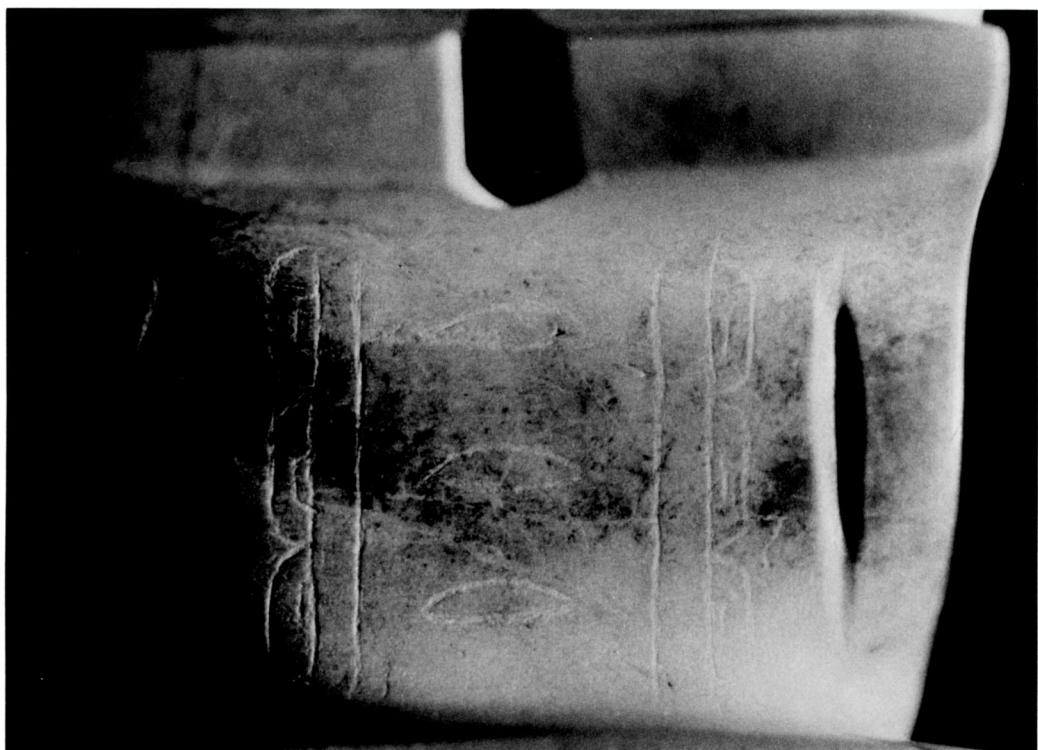


Fig. 12 Back of the head.

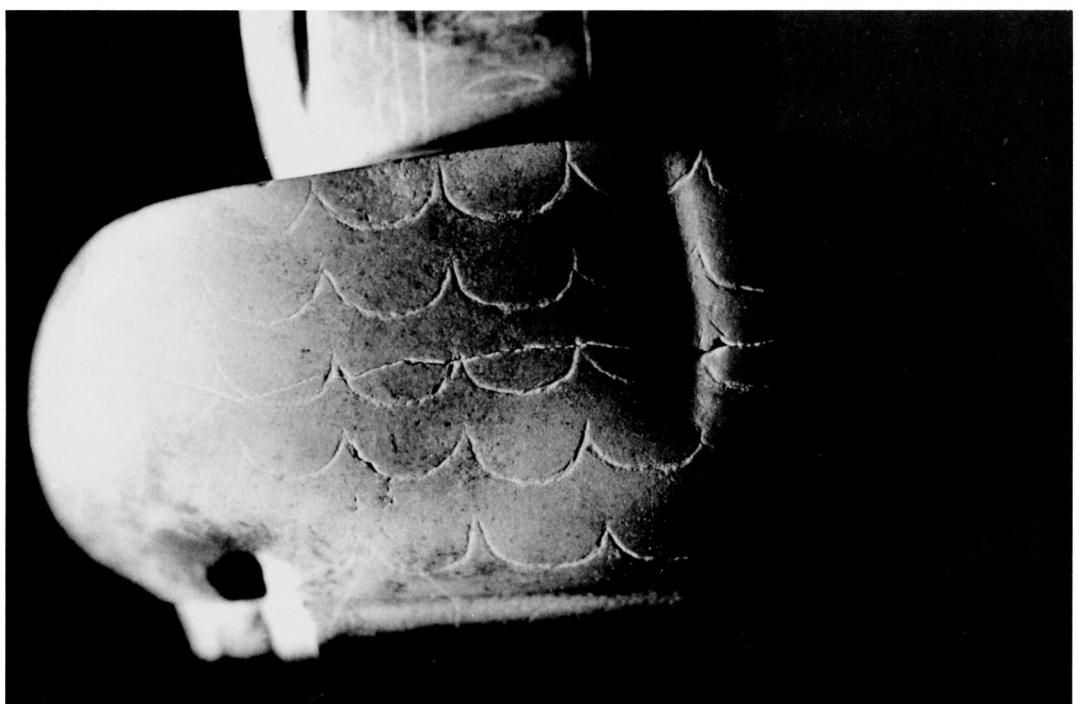


Fig. 13 Cape.



Fig. 14 Tail below the cape.



Fig. 15 Shoulder of the cape showing birdheads (and suspender below).

tween them. Next to the birdheads at each side is an ear protector, each of which has two incised cleft elements with a dot or circle between, and a double-bar(?) motif at the top and at the bottom. (It is not clear whether this is intended as three bars or two bars with a space between.)

At the back of the head, below the quadrant formed by the cleft, is an incising of two double vertical lines with three repetitions of Joralemon's (1971) "bracket gum markings" or "repeated brackets as edging" on each side, and three "eyes" in a vertical row in the center (Fig. 12). This section may indicate an accessory hanging from the headdress, or a means of attaching it. There are two deeply cut vertical troughs at the back of the head, outside and parallel to the incised design.

The back of the feather cape has five horizontal,

wavelike rows of incising to indicate feathers (Fig. 13). The tail below the cape is divided into five vertical panels, in which are incised dangling elements probably representing flowers or possibly jade ornaments attached to the garment (Fig. 14). The designs within the panels alternate. In the outer and center panels there are two different designs in each: one is a bell-shaped form, which is at the top in the two outside panels and at the bottom in the center one, and the other is a bell-flower from which is enclosed in an upside-down U, which seems to serve as the outer petals or leaves of the flower; the design in the other two panels is a single cleft element hanging from a string or vine.

Where the feather cape meets the shoulder in front, the cape surface is divided into curving zones. Near the figure's face, in the first zone on either side, is a bird-



Fig. 16 The other shoulder of the cape.



Fig. 17 The suspender on one side.

head (Figs. 15 and 16) similar to those on the headdress extension and the sides of the helmet. The second panel on each side is plain, and the third is again incised with a birdhead, so that there are altogether four of these designs. These heads are not very well defined, but one of them appears not to have the round eye of the other birdheads.

The feather cape is held on by "suspenders," incised down the figure's chest (Figs. 17 and 18). Each suspender has an L-shaped motif above a lower-case h, with the directions reversed on each side. At the outer

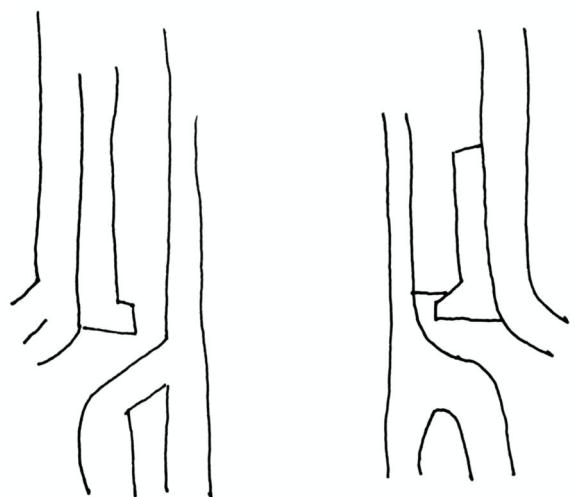


Fig. 18 Drawing of the designs of the suspenders.

side of each L is a parallel curving band that seems to go under the arm, perhaps representing a strap attached to the cape. One can envision the cape's being worn more or less in the manner of a life jacket. It might be possible to read this suspender design as a birdhead.

The suspenders lead to a belt (Fig. 19) with a crossed-bands motif in the center. Just above this central panel is a curious semicircle, like a giant belly button, which looks at first as if it might have been made with a hollow drill, but could not have been because the belt below it stands out from the body and would have blocked the movement of the drill. Along the top of the belt, on either side of the semicircle, there is incised on the body a band with diagonal hatching; these are like the hatchings bordering the round eye on the helmet, and may represent a feathered edging on the belt. The crossed-bands motif is enclosed in a frame that has a plain band at the top and at the bottom, and a double band at the ends. On the outside at the top and bottom is another band with hatching. At either side of the crossed-bands panel are two more panels with incising. These panels are vertical and more-or-less rectangular. The inner ones have a design of four horizontal bands, and the outer two have profile heads

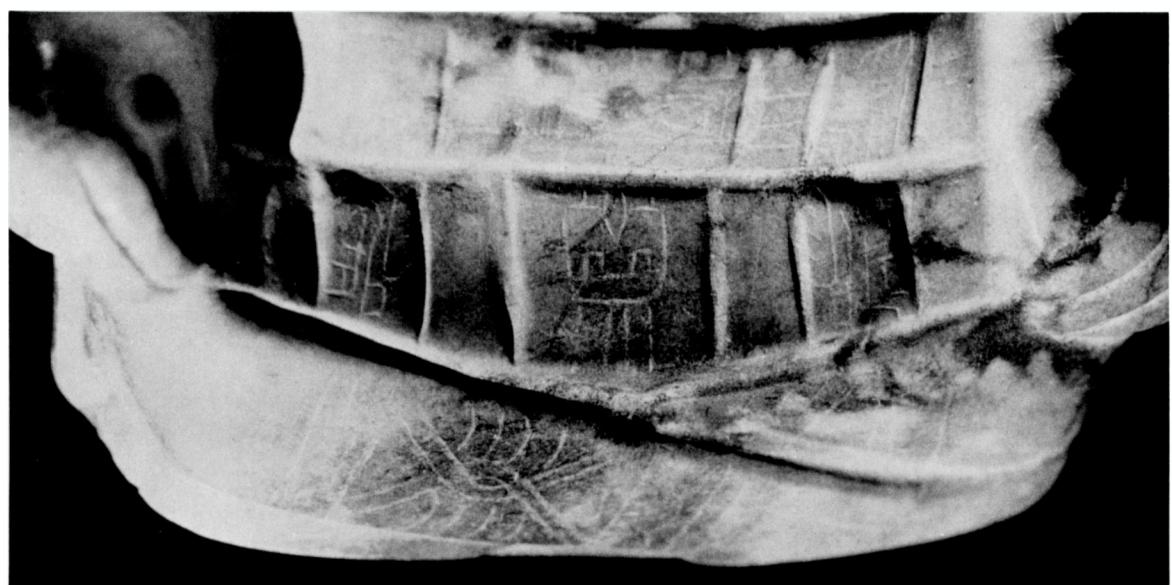
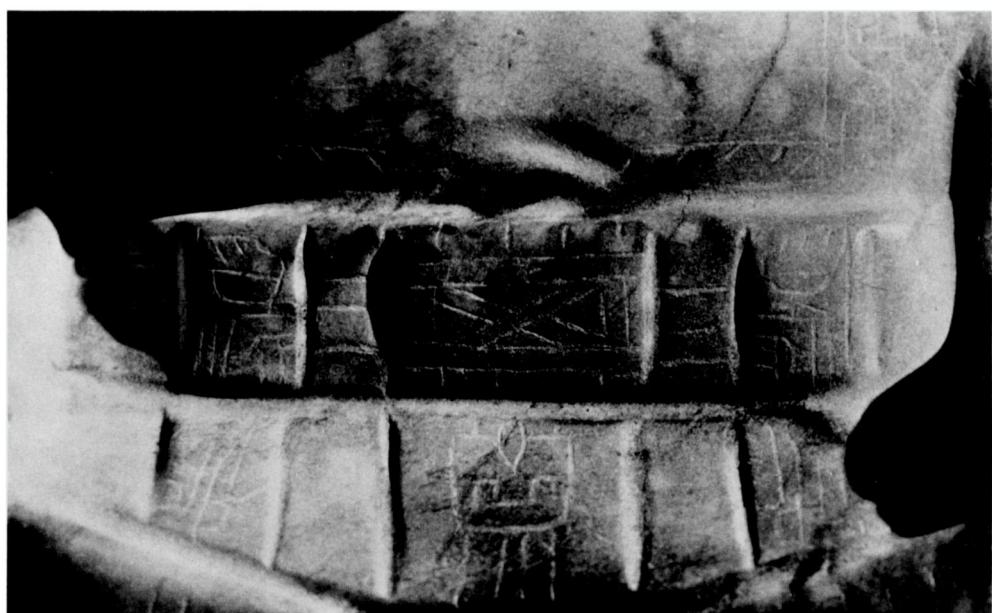
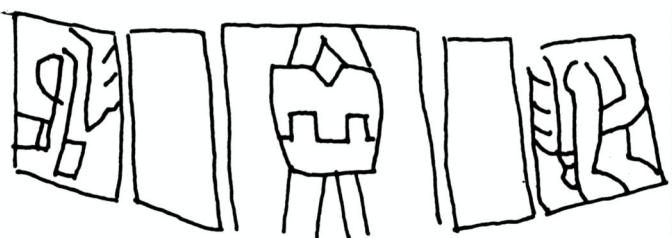


Fig. 19 (top) The belt.  
Fig. 20 (center) The kilt.  
Fig. 21 (bottom) Drawing of the  
kilt designs.



with crests or flame brows, what may be a closed eye, and a were-jaguar mouth with a fang. They appear also to have the band going at a right angle from the jaw to the nostril—the same motif that appears on the mask on the front of the headdress extension. At the outside of the belt, by each arm, is a plain rectangle that is on a lower plane than the rest of the belt.

The same pattern of rectangles is repeated on the kilt (Figs. 20 and 21). The central panel is again the largest and is horizontal. It has an incised cleft element containing the double merlon. This cleft-merlon motif looks like some sort of pendant or sporran hung by two straps, which are shown above the motif as well as hanging below it. The design reflects that of the second face on the helmet band, where the mouth is a cleft element—without the double merlon—and has two pendant bands below it. The panels at either side of this are plain, but the outer two panels have incising. The designs are difficult to read: they appear to be birdheads, vertical and down-facing. One can read

part of a crest, an eye, a cere, and a beak. Again, there are two plain vertical rectangles, on a slightly lower plane, on the outside, by the hands of the figure.

Each lower arm is incised (Fig. 22). By the elbow, a band with the double merlon is joined to what appear to be two knotted bindings, which pass over three curved bands; the knotted part might be read as a crossed-bands motif. Toward the wrist is a band with hatching that is overlapped by a band with an inverted V going up into the feathered band. There is then a plain band at the wrist, and, on the back of the hand, a cleft element. There are also “puttees” incised on the legs (Fig. 23). Again there is a sort of interlaced double-merlon band, then the knotted bands with three curving bands behind them, and a hatched band toward the ankle. The edge of this is scalloped, forming a wavy design like that on the back of the cape. One sees here that the V design at the wrists would read as a wavy design if it were continued. There is a plain band next and then a cleft element on the foot.



Fig. 22 Arm of the figure.



Fig. 23 Legs of the figure.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER OLMEC SCULPTURE

THE ICONOGRAPHY of this object can be compared with that of a number of other Olmec objects. Most of the motifs represented here appear individually on other Olmec pieces, and configurations of some of the same elements that appear here are also found on other Olmec figures. Since this figure is particularly rich in motifs, and since the motifs must have had quite specific connotations for the Olmec, it seems worthwhile investigating these relationships.

The helmet with ear protectors has some similarity to those on colossal heads, as well as on figurines, but the whole headdress compares most strikingly with that of the *Ídolo de San Martín Pajapan* (Fig. 24). Both have a headdress extension and a horizontal cleft as part of the headdress, forming four bars at the rear. On the *Ídolo de San Martín*, the four-bar motif is repeated at the sides of the headdress extension. The *San Martín*

monument has a cleft head on the front of the headdress that might be compared to the cleft mask on the Dumbarton Oaks headdress extension. The cleft head on the *San Martín* piece is larger than the head of the figure itself, whereas that on the Dumbarton Oaks figure is smaller. A similar concept is shown on the Maudslay jade (Bushnell 1964; Joralemon 1970: Fig. 189) where a diminutive figure has a large head with a slightly larger cleft head above it. In the case of the Maudslay jade, these are both were-jaguar faces, whereas the Dumbarton Oaks piece and the *San Martín* sculpture have a were-jaguar above a human face, suggesting the idea of a deity protector hovering over the human being. The *San Martín* monument does not have the helmet with four cleft faces on it, but has instead four "masks" attached at the ears, two on each side. As well as can be discerned from the present condition of the *San Martín* sculpture, the four mask faces are not differentiated as are the four masks

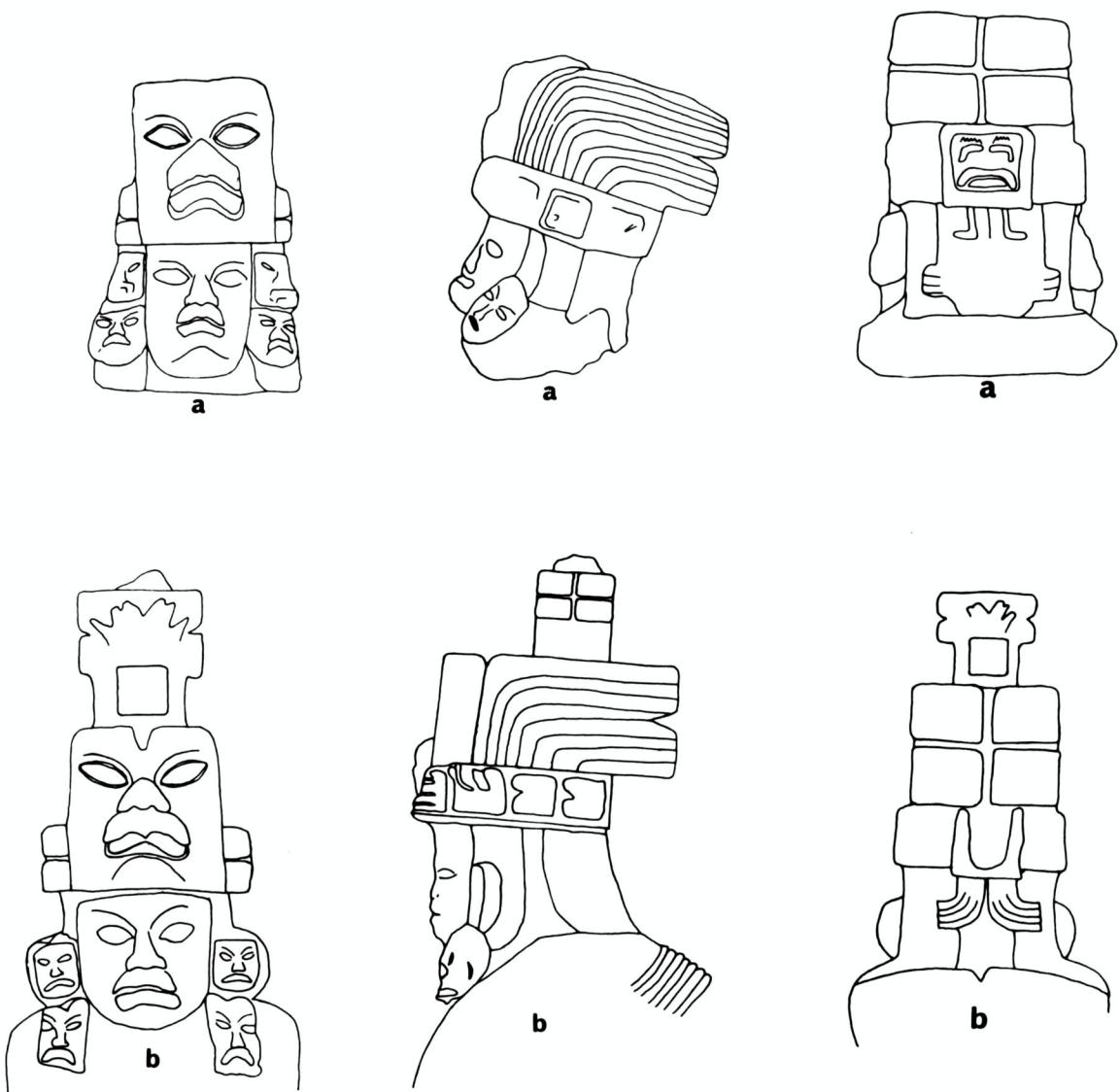


Fig. 24 Heads of La Venta Monument 44 (top) and the Ídolo de San Martín Pajapan (bottom). After Clewlow 1970: Figs. 1–3. (For the San Martín figure, see also Medellín

Zenfl 1968; Bernal and Groth 1968: Pl. 6. For Monument 44, see also Heizer *et al.* 1968: Foto 18; Clewlow and Corson 1968: Pls. 11e and 12a.)

on the Dumbarton Oaks figure, although two of the masks are cleft and two are not. Whereas the Dumbarton Oaks figure has two cleft elements on the ear protectors, the San Martín figure has two cleft elements horizontally placed at the sides of the headdress. The San Martín headdress is broken off at the top, but it may also have had a three-pronged projection.

Clewlow (1968: 40) has suggested that the lines on the sides of the cleft part of the San Martín headdress may represent feathers. Although this motif does not appear on the Dumbarton Oaks piece, there are motifs on the latter piece that appear to be other ways of representing feathers.

La Venta Monument 44 (Fig. 24) should also be

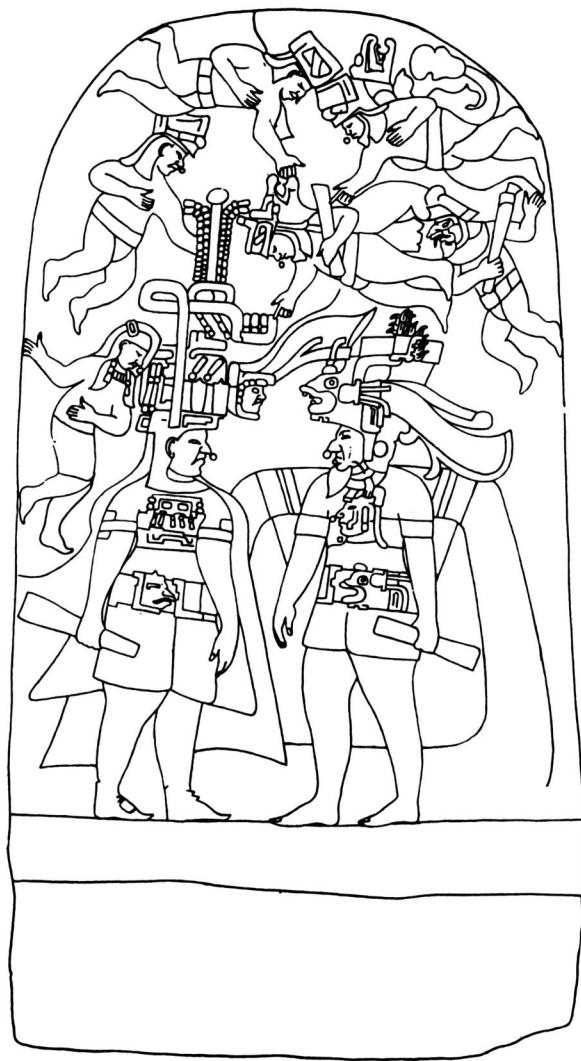


Fig. 25 Reconstruction drawing of La Venta Stela 3. After Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 68. (See also Heizer 1967: Pl. 1; Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 67.)

mentioned here. It has been broken so that only the head and the large mask above it remain, but Clewlow (1968) has indicated that it probably had a headdress extension similar to that of the San Martín piece. It has the horizontally cleft rear of the headdress with the four-bar division, and a large mask on the front of the headdress above the figure's face. There are also four masks at the ears.

The three-pronged "vegetation" motif that appears on the top of the Dumbarton Oaks headdress occurs with some frequency at the top of the head of incised figures (e.g., Figs. 36a and 36b; Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Fig. 1; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 177), as well as on the upper parts of La Venta Stela 2 (Fig. 39) and Monument 15 (Drucker 1952: Pl. 64a; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 147), and on the headdress of the left-hand figure on La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 25). The birdheads that adorn this motif on the Dumbarton Oaks figure are reminiscent of incised birdheads on ear ornaments from La Venta (Drucker 1952: Fig. 59; Joralemon 1971: Figs. 131 and 199c), although they do not appear to have the reptilian fangs shown on the La Venta objects. I know of no instance other than the Dumbarton Oaks piece where birdheads are shown on the three-pronged motif.

The left-hand figure on La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 25) wears an elaborate headdress that seems to be topped by a shape very like that of the Dumbarton Oaks headdress extension—a vertical piece (represented in profile), ending in the three-pronged vegetation motif at the top. The extension shown on the Stela 3 headdress appears to have been covered with mosaic, seen here from the side. If people actually walked about in such headdresses, they may have had mosaic masks on them, and it is conceivable that the front mask and the complex of elements on the back of the Dumbarton Oaks headdress extension represent mosaic work.

A small standing serpentine figure (Fig. 26), carved in the round, also in the Dumbarton Oaks Collections, holds in one hand a knuckleduster with the same wavy line that is incised on the pair of knuckledusters on the headdress extension of the seated Dumbarton Oaks figure. In the other hand he holds what appears to be a bundle of sticks with the double-merlon motif at the top in a semicircle with hatching around the edges. This latter object has been called a "torch" (Coe 1965: 762; Joralemon 1971: 16); its meaning has been further explored by Cervantes (1969). The top of the object—the semicircle with hatching and the double merlon—is identical with the motif that appears above the four masks on the helmet of the seated figure, except that,

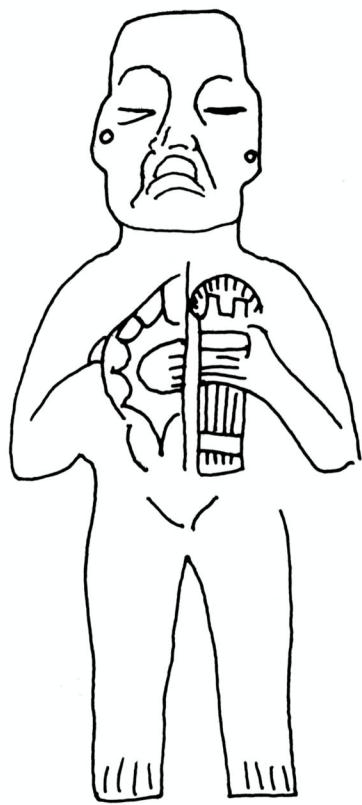


Fig. 26 Serpentine figurine. Provenience unknown. Dumbarton Oaks Collections.

on the seated figure, two lines at the top extend from the hatching into the groove of the brow above. If it is a torch that the standing figure is holding, then this would indicate a torch symbol above each cleft mask on the helmet of the seated figure.

The double-merlon-within-the-hatched-semicircle motif, which appears on both the Dumbarton Oaks figures, also appears as an object in itself held in the hands of a seated figure (Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Fig. 21; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 21), where it is held in both hands like a scepter or presentation object. The double-merlon-within-a-semicircle without hatching appears on the reliefs at Las Victorias (Fig. 27), held like a ceremonial mace by one figure and possibly by others also. Cervantes (1969), in discussing the torch motif, does not differentiate between ex-

amples that include the double merlon and those that do not. Perhaps there is no difference in meaning, but the double merlon does seem to add to, or clarify, the meaning of the torch. The question is whether the double merlon is a symbol for flame or whether it is added to the torch to give another meaning. If the first is true, it may be a stylization of volcanoes, of the peaks that give out flame. The torch might be a symbol of sacred fire, and the four masks on the helmet of the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure may carry an association of fire, volcanoes, or mountains. The hatchings in other instances on this figure and elsewhere sometimes suggest feathers. Hatching may carry the meanings of both flame and feathers; feathers may even have been used as symbols of flame. If so, this may explain some of the confusion between representations of crested heads and flame brows. Michael Coe (personal communication) has suggested that the bird-heads on this figure are fire serpents, but I am inclined to think that these are crested birds—perhaps harpy eagles or hawk-eagles. However, crested heads and flame brows may not only be represented by the same kind of drawing, but may also have a closely related meaning. It is further possible that the hatching may sometimes indicate fur—particularly jaguar fur—as a jade pendant from Oaxaca (Fig. 33) might suggest. Because there are close relationships in Olmec art between jaguar and bird, and probably between jaguar and fire, this would not seem illogical.

Another use of the double merlon with hatching appears on a black slate celт from Simojovel, Chiapas (Fig. 28), on which is incised a fairly naturalistic profile head with headdress above and what appears to be a pectoral below. As on the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure, rather complicated symbolic motifs are combined with a realistic face, which is probably a portrait. The pectoral is in three tiers, and has various zigzag forms, including a single diagonal band within a vertical rectangle. The top tier (which suggests the type of pectoral exemplified by one in the Dumbarton Oaks Collections [Coe 1966], where a were-jaguar face with a cleft head is centered between two approximate squares, each with a crossed-bands motif) has hori-

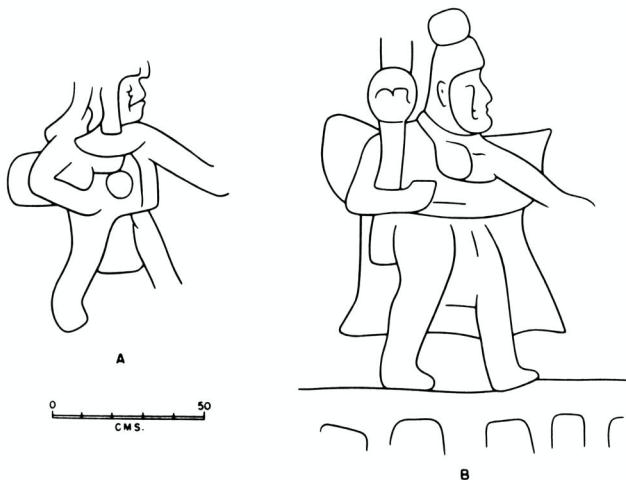


Fig. 27 Petroglyphs at Las Victorias, El Salvador. After Boggs 1950: Fig. 1. (See also photographs in Boggs Fig. 1.)

zontal V's at the sides, forming crossed bands interrupted by a cleft square in which there is a double merlon with hatching above, and, between the double merlon and the hatching, two lines that look as if they might be stylized eyes, but undoubtedly represent the same circular form that appears in the torch motif.

It has been noted that the Dumbarton Oaks standing figure holds not only a torch, but also a knuckleduster virtually identical with those on the seated figure. Knuckledusters are used in different ways in Olmec art (Coe 1965: 764-5; Cervantes 1969). Sometimes they are held in the hand, with the hand clearly indicated, as on the Dumbarton Oaks standing figure. On the stela from Padre Piedra (Coe 1965: Fig. 1), the knuckleduster is held away from the body and looks reminiscent of a "padlock stone." Monument 10 from San Lorenzo (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 222), a figure with a cleft head and were-jaguar mouth, holds a pair of knuckledusters to his chest. A seated figure in the Cleveland Museum (Coe 1965: Fig. 12) has a knuckleduster on one hand, enclosing the fist, and what might be either a torch or vegetation or even a war club in the other; this is the only full-round knuckleduster I know. A celt of unknown provenience (Fig. 29), decorated with a full standing figure who gives an immediate impression of being a masked warrior, has a knuckle-

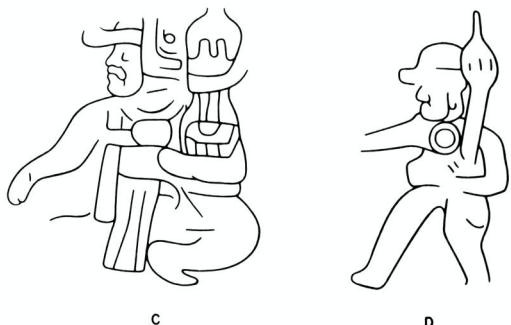


Fig. 28 Slate celt from Simojovel, Chiapas. (See also Coe 1965: Fig. 17.)

duster form, with a prominent fist which appears to be grasping a bundle of other objects; it is not clear what this knuckleduster is attached to. The head of the figure is in profile and has a headdress with two cleft elements (probably implying two more on the other side), above which is a large profile mask, with the knuckleduster just behind it, so that the spatial relationship between them is more or less the same as that of the knuckledusters and the mask on the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure. (This figure seems to be wearing a mouth mask which is probably part of a whole face mask; it has the right angle from chin to nose with a cleft form within it.) On a celт from La Venta (Fig. 30), a pair of knuckledusters is used in place of the mouth, or perhaps represents a pair of knuckledusters held in front of the mouth, for lines seem to indicate the fingers inside the object. (This celт also has a headdress with four leaf-shaped elements with a central egg-shaped element, similar to that above the front headdress-extension mask on the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure.) The knuckledusters on the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure do not have inside them the lines which, on other pieces, must surely represent fingers. It is possible that the inner parts of these knuckledusters may depict ears. Cervantes (1969: Pl. I, Fig. 1) has published a "disk-altar" with a were-jaguar face in the center and a hand holding a knuckleduster at one side of the head and a torch at the other side of the head. This is the only other instance I know where the knuckleduster appears at the ear of a were-jaguar face. On the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure, it is possible that the knuckledusters form a sort of cauliflower ear for the mask, or ear ornaments, or perhaps simply a pair of objects attached to the mask. The Padre Piedra figure suggests that possibly the knuckleduster was some sort of ballgame equipment, although perhaps, as Coe (1965: 764-5) has suggested, it was actually a weapon. Cervantes (1969) makes a case for its use as a ceremonial object, with which I am inclined to agree—although

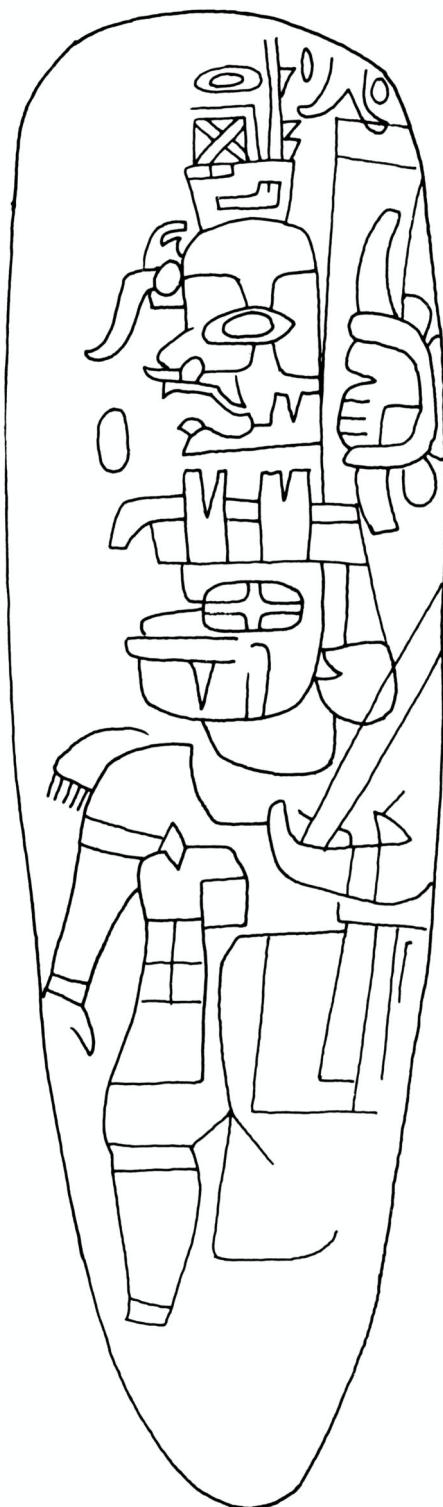


Fig. 29 Celт. Provenience unknown. After Joralemon 1971: Fig. 33.

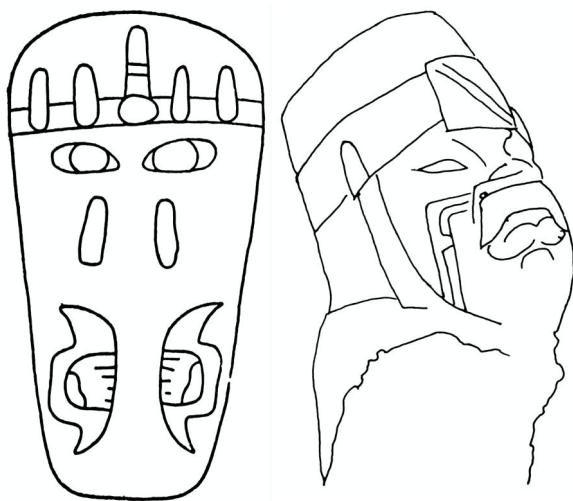
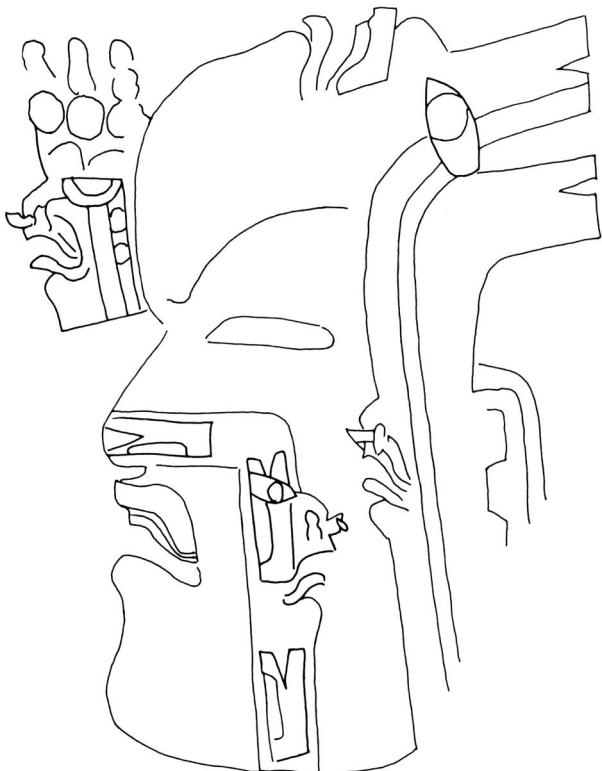


Fig. 30 (left) Celt from cache in Mound A-2, La Venta.  
After Drucker 1952: Fig. 47.

Fig. 31 (center) Head of figurine from El Baúl, Guatemala.  
(See also Shook 1956.)

Fig. 32 (right) Design on pectoral in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. (See also Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Plates.)



this would not necessarily exclude its use as either a weapon or a piece of ballgame equipment. It may well have been also a sort of glyph with secondary meanings, and may be used in such a way on the Dumbarton Oaks figure.

The square-faced, square-mouthed were-jaguar mask on the front of the headdress extension is a typical Olmec motif, which would be Joralemon's God IV, the rain god (1971: 71). The mask has a double (or triple) band going from the chin to the nose, which is somewhat unusual, although the head from El Baúl (Fig. 31), the Kunz axe (Covarrubias 1957: Pl. XVI, upper left; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 168), the heads on the belt of the Dumbarton Oaks figure (Fig. 19), and several other pieces have a single band—sometimes rather complicated—running up the cheek from the jaw and heading into the nose at a right angle. Joralemon (1971) describes this as a downturned bracket, and it may well relate to the bracket motif, but this use as a facial decoration should probably have special attention. The motif forms a mouth mask, enclosing

both the mouth and the nostrils. One thinks of the concept of decoration—ornaments or tattooing—around the orifices of the body to keep out evil spirits (perhaps the Olmec eye plaque also relates to this), and one thinks also of the cave concept that was so important to the Olmec. The banded facial motif forms a sort of cave from which the jaguar mouth emerges, perhaps representing quite literally the "mouth of a cave."

A carved and incised pectoral in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Fig. 32) shows a naturalistic human profile with the same sort of right-angle form composed of a cleft head with a series of cleft elements within it. The Las Limas figure (Fig. 43), which will be discussed later, has a mouth bracketed by a band containing cleft elements, as well as other designs. Both the Las Limas figure and the pectoral in the Museo Nacional also have other relationships to the Dumbarton Oaks figure, particularly in that they have human faces accompanied by incised ceremonial motifs, which include four cleft heads. In addition to the

cleft head at the mouth, the Museo Nacional piece has a head cleft at a right angle to the body with a were-jaguar profile on it that is comparable to the mask on the front of the Dumbarton Oaks headdress extension; there is also a profile just in front of the brow of the major face, which may also indicate a mask. There is a fourth head between the eye and the ear. These four faces suggest the four cleft masks on the helmet band of the Dumbarton Oaks figure. The four masks on the helmet band and on the Museo Nacional pectoral are all different, although both groups have some sort of vertical line running to or through the eye. The line through the eye is diagnostic of Joralemon's God VI, or the equivalent of the Mexican Xipe Totec (Joralemon 1971: 79). However, Joralemon's examples of God VI always have this line curving back toward the ear, whereas on the Dumbarton Oaks piece the lines on the two central masks seem to have as their primary purpose the composition of a double panel down the center of the face; the two outside masks have eye plaques. One thinks of the four manifestations of deities in later Mesoamerican religions: the four Chacs, the four Tezcatlipocas, etc. The four faces on the Dumbarton Oaks helmet band may be not four different deities but four aspects of the same deity, unlike the four profile faces on the Las Limas figure, which have been identified (Coe 1968: 111-15) as four different deities. This repetition of four faces, or of four cleft elements, is fairly common in Olmec art. One thinks not only of the Museo Nacional pectoral and the Las Limas figure, but also of the four "masks" attached to the ears of the San Martín figure and La Venta Monument 44, as well as of the four cleft elements on the headband of the San Martín figure (the latter probably being equivalents of the two cleft elements on each ear protector of the Dumbarton Oaks figure), the four cleft elements across the brow of a celt from Los Tuxtlas, Veracruz (Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Fig. 1; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 177), and the pendant from Oaxaca (Fig. 33).

Drucker suggests (1952: 178) that the cleft element derives from the V-shaped depression formed by the nearly converging supraorbital ridges of the jaguar.

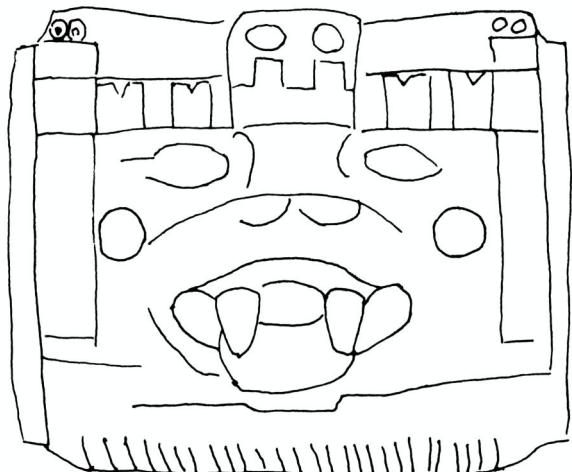


Fig. 33 Jade pendant from Oaxaca. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico (See also Bernal 1969: Pl. 18c; Covarrubias 1946: Pl. 7.)

Coe has noted (1965: 752) that stillborn infants have an open cranium and, often, idiotlike faces; this would reinforce the association between jaguar and "baby face." But the cleft element is so frequently used in Olmec art, and in such a variety of ways, that it must have had secondary meanings more remote from its appearance in nature. The cleft element may signify "jaguar"; it may also mean "power." But what is the nature of this power? Does it still relate fairly directly to the jaguar? Do the hands of the Dumbarton Oaks figure, for instance, have power which is expressed by the cleft element, or are they given power by this sign of the jaguar? Every important part of the body of the Dumbarton Oaks figure is "protected" by a cleft element: the head displays a number of them, each ear has two, each hand has a cleft element, as does each foot (making another set of four), and there is also a cleft element in the center of the kilt where the sexual organ would be. This may suggest the power of the man himself, or the power of the protection of a jaguar deity.

The circle on the front of the helmet of the figure has some resemblance to the eye on the headdress of Oxtotitlan Mural 1 which Grove (1970: 9) has identified as that of an owl, and perhaps the rather unusual

feathered brows on the helmet reinforce this association. But what does the circle mean in other instances on the figure? Joralemon (1971) lists the circular motif as a “round eye” (undoubtedly avian), a design derived from a “spotted skin,” and a “corn-seed dot.” But what is its meaning when it appears between the two cleft elements on the ear protectors, or when it appears on the brow of the second-from-the-left mask on the helmet band, which has a cleft-element mouth? The circle appears in many combinations on Olmec objects, often with the cleft element or with the double merlon. For example, a jade pendant from Oaxaca (Fig. 33) has an unusual were-jaguar face (it is more jaguar than most) with a band across the brow composed of two cleft elements on either side of a squarish form which contains the double-merlon motif with a circle above each merlon. There is hatching across the bottom of the pendant which seems to suggest the fur of the jaguar. (Were beards held in such respect because they were similar to the hair or the whiskers of the jaguar?) If the cleft stands basically for “jaguar,”

the circle may signify “bird (eye).” Or the circle may be a stylization of the spots on the jaguar’s body (as the circles on the cheek of the creature in Fig. 33 might suggest), so that it, too, would signify “jaguar” or “jaguar body” while the cleft would signify specifically “jaguar head.”

Above the circle on the center of the headdress band on the Dumbarton Oaks figure is a glyphlike motif with two parallel diagonal bands (parallel bands also appear on one of the masks on the helmet). The El Baúl head (Fig. 31) has at the center of its helmet, directly above the nose, a plaque with a single diagonal band that probably conveys the same meaning. (It is regrettable that we do not know what the rest of the El Baúl figurine looked like, for the head has two motifs that appear on the Dumbarton Oaks figure: the diagonal band and the right-angle cheek marking.) A single diagonal band, like half of a crossed-bands motif, appears fairly often in Olmec art, but it is not commonly paired with another parallel diagonal band. San Lorenzo Monument 52 (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 211)



Fig. 34 La Venta Altar 4. (See also Bernal and Groth 1968: Pl. 4.)

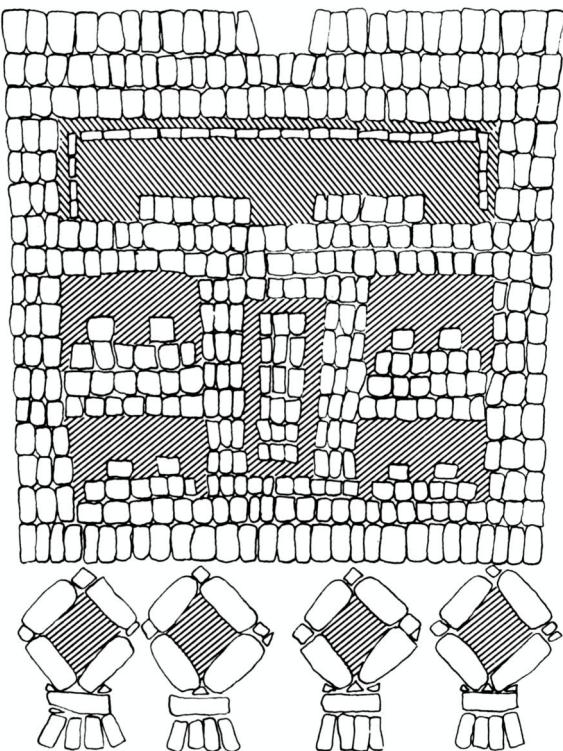


Fig. 35 Mosaic pavement from La Venta. After Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 29.

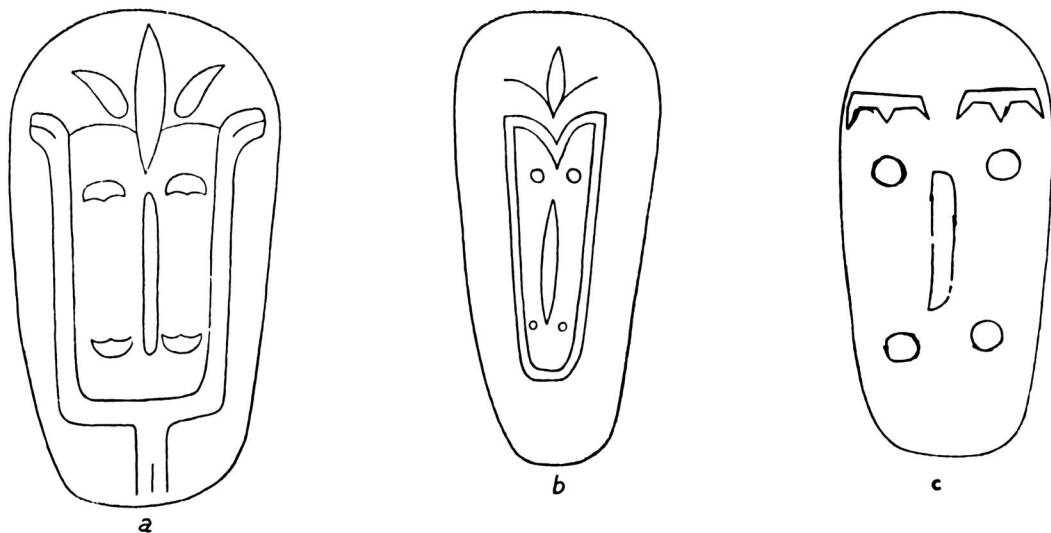
has two diagonal bands on the headdress and the celt from Simojovel (Fig. 28) has various uses of diagonal bands, but in neither case are they parallel.

Two of the instances I have found of parallel diagonal bands are associated with jaguar-monsters (both identified by Joralemon 1971: Figs. 144, 159 as God I). In Oxtotitlan Mural 1 (Grove 1970: Frontispiece), the jaguar-monster throne has parallel diagonal bands in the mouth; La Venta Altar 4 (Fig. 34) has the bands at the sides of the jaguar mouth at the top of the altar. (The jaguar mouth at the top of Izapa Stela 21 also has parallel diagonal bands.) La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 25) has two parallel diagonal bands on the headdress of the left-hand figure below the headdress extension. The diagonal bands might be considered as components of the crossed-bands motif and therefore related to it in meaning. Altar 4, in addition to the parallel diagonal

bands, has a crossed-bands element in the mouth of the jaguar monster, and the left-hand helmet mask of the Dumbarton Oaks figure also has a crossed-bands element in the mouth.

The crossed-bands motif is, of course, one of the most common Olmec motifs, and is used in various ways. It is shown in the eye of San Lorenzo Monument 30 (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 8) and in one eye of Monument 1 from Laguna de los Cerros (Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Plates; Joralemon 1970: Fig. 125), as well as in the eyes of birdheads (Piña Chan and Covarrubias 1964: Fig. 1; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 177). It is also commonly used on pectorals—for example, on the Las Limas baby (Fig. 43), Oxtotitlan Mural 1 (Grove 1970: Frontispiece), and La Venta Monument 30 (Clewlow and Corson 1968: 9c)—as a headdress ornament (e.g., Fig. 28; Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 33, right; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 172), and as a central belt ornament, as on the Dumbarton Oaks figure, the Las Limas baby (Fig. 43), and the British Museum axe (Bernal 1969: Pl. 49b; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 162). The significance of the crossed-bands motif has been discussed by Coe (1968: 114–15) as related to the Maya glyph for “sky” and “snake”—that is, the motif probably derived from the pattern of a snake’s marking and came to have the meaning of sky as well.

The complex of elements on the back of the Dumbarton Oaks headdress extension (Fig. 7) relates to a number of other pieces, notably the three mosaic pavements at La Venta (Fig. 35) which also have a cleft, a downturned E, and a central, vertical bar with two elements at either side—in the case of the La Venta pavements, double merlons. A celt from La Venta Mound A-2 (Fig. 36a) has a design of a vertical bar and four variant downturned E’s (the lower two are actually upturned). This celt has three vegetation elements at the top (as does the Dumbarton Oaks mask) and is held in a kind of mirror frame, with bifurcated ends, which resembles that on the Dumbarton Oaks piece. Another celt from Mound A-2 (Fig. 36b) has a simplified version of this design with the vegetation element above a cleft head with four circles, two on either side of a variant vertical bar.



There is an ever closer relationship between the Dumbarton Oaks mask and an axe in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 37), which has a pattern of two downturned E's over the vertical bar and four circles on the body of the celt; this pattern has a cleft at the top and a were-jaguar face above. The same design appears, without the cleft, on a celt from La Venta Offering No. 2 (Fig. 36c), and the same set of elements is indicated on another celt from La Venta Offering No. 4 (Fig. 38a), where, at the top of a complicated scene, a cleft element is seen with two circles and a vertical bar (there were probably two more circles on the other side of the bar). I believe that the eroded design on the headdress of La Venta Stela 2 (Fig. 39) also includes the two-dot-and-vertical-rectangle motif, although it is apparently not associated with cleft and downturned-E elements; it appears, rather, to be accompanied by a three-pronged element and two curving lines.

Objects with the four-dot-and-vertical-bar motif, combined with downturned E's and a cleft, or some variation of this pattern, seem by and large to come from La Venta. With the exception of the axe (of which the provenience is unknown), the Dumbarton Oaks figure, and a sello from Tlatilco (Franco C. 1959: Fig. 1c; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 135), all the published examples of this cluster come from La Venta. (There

Fig. 36 Three celts from La Venta. *a* and *b* from Mound A-2. After Drucker 1952: Fig. 47. *c* from Offering 2. After Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 35c.

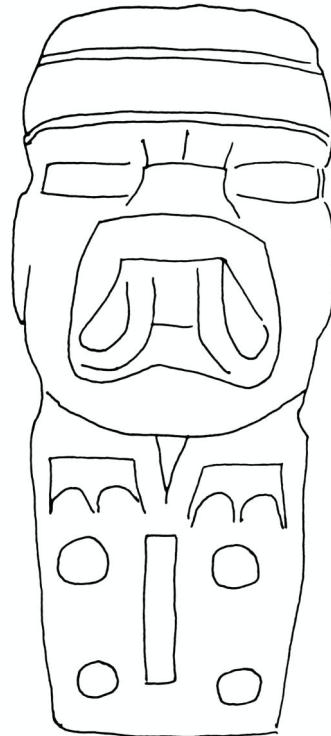


Fig. 37 Axe. Provenience unknown. Cleveland Museum of Art. (See also Kubler 1962: Pl. 28A; Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 32.)

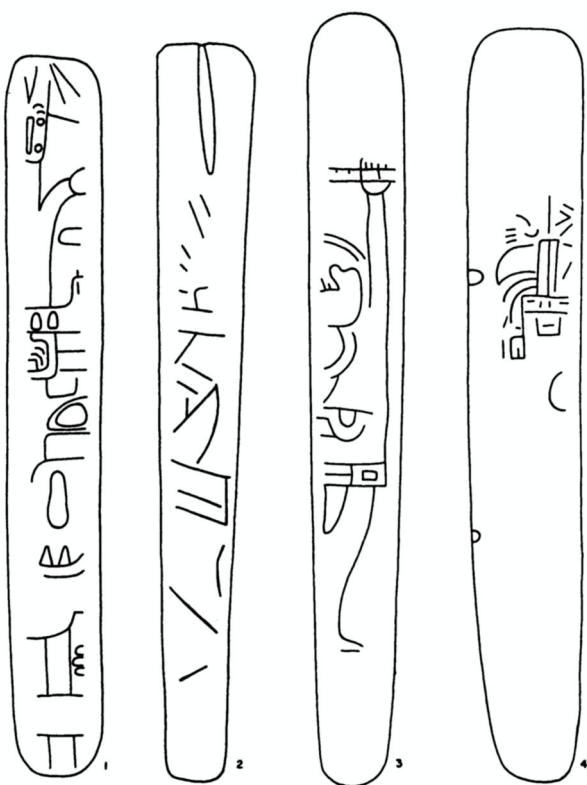


Fig. 38 Four celts from La Venta Offering No. 4. After Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 40.

is an unpublished mask, presumably also from the Arroyo Pesquero find, which has incising reminiscent of that on the face of the Las Limas figure, but more complicated. Below the mouth of this mask are three of these motifs—cleft/downturned-E/four-dots-and-vertical-bar—upside down.) This combination of motifs may have had a particular association with La Venta, and may even be a sort of place glyph.

What is unusual about the Dumbarton Oaks version is that the downturned E has four prongs rather than the usual three. I know of no other four-pronged downturned E, although this may be roughly comparable to the pairs of downturned E's in Figs. 36c and 37. The derivation of the downturned E is interesting to speculate on. I believe that the downturned E is very closely related to the cleft element; it is perhaps

essentially the cleft itself. The Olmec had a penchant for enclosed designs. The cleft element is a space enclosed below the cleft (and can therefore be read as the head) and the downturned E is a space enclosed above the cleft.

If one attempts to interpret the design on the La Venta pavements, one starts with the total cleft enclosure. The cleft element must be a sacred space, or an outlining of power. Perhaps it is the world, the Olmec world, the world of the jaguar. Then how does one read the interior elements? The large downturned E at the top is the top of the jaguar's head repeated as a separate element. Is this the sky, or is it the head of the jaguar rising from the earth and therefore a sign of the earth or underworld? The four double merlons may represent the four world directions, the corners of the



Fig. 39 Main figure of La Venta Stela 2. (See also Stirling 1965: Fig. 14.)

Olmec world; this would not necessarily be inconsistent with the interpretation of the double merlon as a sign for mountains, volcanos, or flame. It is conceivable that the Olmec thought of a mountain at each corner of the world. But then, on other examples of this glyph, the four elements are not double merlons, but circles. Are these circles a shorthand symbol for the double-merlon-within-the-semicircle which was discussed above, and which was expressed on the La Venta pavements as a double-merlon-within-a-rectangle? The double merlon is fairly commonly associated with a circular form (e.g., Fig. 33); the circle without the double merlon may stand for the same thing. The most mysterious element in this motif complex is the vertical bar. It is the one diagnostic element in all the variations of this glyph. It could possibly stand for the nose of a face, but I, at least, have given up trying to read this design as a face. It appears only once possibly used as a mask or in the position of a face (Fig. 40). Moreover, this stylization would suggest a long nose that is not Olmec. It is a central motif, the center on the map, and may perhaps stand for La Venta itself, the long plaza of the site itself centered between the four corners of the world.

The design below this at the back of the head of the



Fig. 40 Celt from La Venta Offering No. 2. After Drucker et al. 1959: Fig. 35b.



Fig. 41 Celt. Provenience unknown. After Coe 1965: Fig. 52.

Dumbarton Oaks figure (Fig. 12) is something of a puzzle. One might read it as a row of three eyes framed by two rows of mouths, and consider that it is shorthand for jaguars or jaguar deities. The repeating bracket motif appears at each side of the La Venta Altar 4 monster mouth (Fig. 34), below the parallel diagonal bands. A row of four repeats of this motif also edges the top of the atlantean altar from Potrero Nuevo. Bernal has published these two altars together (1969: Pls. 14 and 15), and the similarity shows clearly. The bracket motif might be read as a jaguar mouth without the lower jaw, and /or as "cave." The repeating bracket motif is commonly used horizontally, not vertically as it is seen here, where it probably indicates, at least on one level of meaning, the border of an object or garment.

It might also be mentioned here that Altar 4, in addition to sharing with the Dumbarton Oaks figure the parallel diagonal bands, the crossed bands in the mouth, and the repeating-bracket motif, also has the double merlon at the outer edge of the upper register. Moreover, the cave entrance below is surrounded by a frame which has a series of curving hatched lines, and the motif at the sides of this is a bracket with a shape inside, the whole of which is reminiscent of the bracketed "flower" design on the tail of the Dumbarton Oaks figure. This flower motif also appears elsewhere, e.g., as a necklace pendant on La Venta Monument 12 (Drucker 1952: Fig. 60t) and on the back of the Maudslay jade (Bushnell 1964; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 189).

The cape on the Dumbarton Oaks figure may shed some light on the dress of a number of relief figures on Olmec monuments and incised figures on celts. The left-hand figure on La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 25) is apparently wearing a cape that stands out at the back, but, like that on the Dumbarton Oaks figure, does not overhang in front; there also seems to be a second part of the cape below. Similar garments are worn by the figures at the sides of La Venta Altar 5 (Bernal 1969: Pl. 13b,c; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 209) and by figures on Chalcatzingo Petroglyph 2 (Bernal 1969: Fig. 22; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 261) and the Las Victorias carvings (Fig. 27). The Chalcatzingo figures have short capes of winglike shape with a long projection below. All of these figures are elaborately dressed, as is the Dumbarton Oaks figure. One can assume that they are all wearing a garment something like that shown on the Dumbarton Oaks figure, and that these may all be feathered capes. That the wavy lines on the Dumbarton Oaks figure indicate feathers is confirmed by the fact that similar lines are used to delineate feathers on the wings of Tlatilco duck vessels (Covarrubias 1957: Pl. XII). Further evidence is the fact that the seated figure in Mural 1 at Oxtotitlan (Grove 1970: 10 and Frontispiece) appears to be wearing a cape of green feathers. The idea of a feathered cape may also be implied by the jade human figures with wings from Guanacaste, Costa Rica (Bernal 1969: Pl. 103; Jor-

lemon 1971: Fig. 196). The major figure on La Venta Stela 2 (Fig. 39) has what appears to be a cape with "ruffles" for the lower part. I would like to suggest that this might be a three-tiered appendage to the cape rather than triangular ornaments, as Heizer (1967: 33) suggests, and probably represents something like the garment worn by the Atlahuayan figure (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 90), where the man is wearing an animal skin, but with tiers with hatched edges at the back which may represent a feathered appendage to the garment.

On some of the figures incised on celts, there is a two-pointed projection below a seated figure, or the cape of a standing figure, that might represent a bird tail. A celt from La Venta Offering No. 2 (Fig. 40) shows a figure seated cross-legged with hands on knees. There are V's at the bottom of the figure, which, I believe, are suggestive not of feet but of folded bird wings or a forked tail. The figure is very schematically drawn and there is no sign of a cape at the top of the figure, but a bird symbolism seems intended. There are two bars at the rear of the head that probably represent a cleft (the two-bar motif may be another way of expressing the cleft element—the cleft seen from another angle, e.g., the rectangles at the back of the head of the Dumbarton Oaks figure). Over the brow is a framed circle that is possibly an owl eye. The face appears to be in profile and has a beaklike nose; at the brow are the tops of two cleft elements in a continuous line. Where the eye would be, there are two circles, one above the other, and there is a vertical bar in the place of the ear, so it would seem to read as half of the four-circle-and-vertical-bar motif found on the above-mentioned celts from La Venta (Fig. 36a-c).

Another celt (Fig. 41) of unknown provenience shows a standing figure with head back at a right angle to the body, so that he is looking straight up at the sky. He has a head cleft at the back—again it seems part of the headdress, not of the head—and a crossed-bands motif at the belt. He appears to be wearing a short cape and kilt, with a scalloped bottom edge, possibly indicating feathers. Below this line is a double V again suggesting a bird tail. The figure has one hand raised

above his head toward the sky, clasping what might be a torch. In the other hand he holds a knuckleduster. Cervantes (1969: 43, Fig. 10) points out that this celт has been drilled for suspension so that the figure should be horizontal, and suggests that perhaps the use of the torch in this position indicates a ceremony in which the participant would have to crawl into a dark place. This idea fits in with the Olmec affection for dark places, but the horizontal pose of this figure also suggests flying, an idea emphasized by the feathered garment. Moreover, the upward-looking pose is characteristic of certain Olmec sculpture.

Still another celт, from La Venta Offering No. 4 (Fig. 38b) has this same theme of a figure holding an object above his backturned head, and a knuckleduster in the other hand. One of the other three decorated celts found in this offering probably shows the same action, although only part of the cleft head remains. (Cervantes [1969: 43–4, Fig. 11] demonstrates that these two celts were originally part of the same celт and that the pieces of the figure actually fit together to make one representation. She also suggests that this figure might also have been intended to be seen horizontally.) It is interesting to note that these are among the celts found in the “scene” behind the standing figures (Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 38; Coe 1968: 68–9), and possibly they depict an action having to do with the scene in which they were placed. The celts from this offering are not only of a different shape from others found at the site (Drucker *et al.* 1959: 156), but the subjects incised on the celts are quite different from those incised on the celts of, for instance, Offering No. 2 (Figs. 36 and 40).

The “suspenders” worn by the Dumbarton Oaks figure are apparently unique, but the “h” and “L” elements appear separately in other places. (On the Dumbarton Oaks figure, the combination could conceivably be read as a bird or monster head, but this is not clear.) Drucker (1952: Fig. 60h) has found a somewhat similar motif on the headdress of La Venta Monument 4. The L shape also appears as the eyes of San Lorenzo Monument 10 (Stirling 1955: Pl. 15b; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 222), the figure holding a pair of

knuckledusters. The “h” element appears on La Venta Plaque 1 (Drucker *et al.* 1959: Fig. 62; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 160), where it seems to form a vertical band coming down to form the nostrils of what was probably a were-jaguar face.

As for the other elements of dress, the belt with the central panel or buckle with a crossed-bands motif is common, but the decorated side panels are unusual. Here the pair of facing profile heads may represent Joralemon’s God III, and they make up another pair of four if combined with the two avian heads on the kilt below. Kilts were sometimes worn (e.g., Fig. 25), but they are not commonly represented as decorated. Legs and arms are very frequently bound, but this is the most elaborate example of binding I know. The knotting suggests the later “Ollin” glyph at Teotihuacan.

There are many seated Olmec figures carved in full round and the poses are extremely varied, but a number of figurines sit in a position similar to that of the Dumbarton Oaks figure, cross-legged, with the fists on the knees, although they usually have the arms cut away from the body: e.g., Figure 2 from the tomb in La Venta Mound A (Drucker 1952: Pl. 46–2) and the figure from El Tejar in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Bernal 1969: Pl. 39), which has the same flattened plane of the front legs as the Dumbarton Oaks piece. These figures, and others in related poses, are, however, unlike the Dumbarton Oaks piece, minimally dressed and have no headdresses, although the El Tejar piece may be wearing a simple helmet headdress. Generally they are either nude or wearing only a loincloth or a wraparound waistband or belt, at most a breechcloth and apron with an ornament at the waist or a pectoral, and perhaps wrappings on the arms and legs. They do not wear elaborate capes and rarely display complicated headdresses. The garb of the Dumbarton Oaks figure is closer to figures represented on low-relief stelae and incised celts.

The San Martín Pajapan figure, with the very similar headdress, has quite a different pose (Bernal and Groth 1968: Pl. 6). It is crouching, kneeling on its left knee, with its right knee bent at a right angle. The

arms go straight down at a diagonal from the shoulder; the figure looks as if it were using a rolling pin, for it holds in both hands a rounded bar that rests on the ground. The figure is simply dressed in a loincloth with a sash, and binding on the arms. Aside from the San Martín figure and La Venta Monument 44, no other known full-round figure has such an elaborate headdress. (Many, of course, have lost their heads, so it is dangerous to carry this generalization too far.)

One piece that is in some respects comparable to the Dumbarton Oaks figure is the figurine in the American Museum of Natural History from Necaxa, Puebla (Fig. 42). Whereas the Dumbarton Oaks figure undoubtedly represents a man and is probably a portrait, the Necaxa figure is a mythological creature, a were-jaguar, rather elaborately dressed, with a crested head. The poses of the Necaxa figure and the Dumbarton Oaks figure are, however, quite similar; both are incised and each has a crossed-bands belt ornament and a cape of sorts (the ribbony cape of the Necaxa figure may be of plumes with cleft ends). One might also mention here the later Tuxtla statuette (Bernal 1969: Pl. 47)—a richly incised birdman.

Another sculpture with which the Dumbarton Oaks piece might be compared is the Las Limas figure (Fig. 43). This figure, although wearing only a loincloth, is similar in pose (except that it holds a were-jaguar baby) and in the elaborateness of incising, although the concentration of incising here is on the face, unlike that on the Dumbarton Oaks figure. The only engraving on the body consists of the four deity heads (Coe 1968: 114–15), one on each shoulder and one on each knee. On each side of the brow, there are two incised cleft elements, each with the double merlon; this is reminiscent of the Dumbarton Oaks helmet band. Moreover, the pairs of profile heads on the Las Limas figure face each other as do the two heads on the belt of the Dumbarton Oaks figure. At each eye of the Las Limas figure is another cleft element with a wavy line toward the bottom. The complicated incising around the mouth—forming a chin-to-nose right angle—amounts to a mouth mask, composed of a frame of cleft elements containing a double merlon.



Fig. 42 Jade figurine from Necaxa, Puebla. American Museum of Natural History. (See also Coe 1965: Fig. 13; Covarrubias 1957: facing p. 78.)

These are exactly like those on the brow and also contain an inverted dinner-bell motif below the double merlon. The cleft-headed baby held by the figure has a crossed-bands motif at both pectoral and belt; it also has ear protectors.

#### FURTHER SPECULATIONS

**WHO WAS THIS MAN?** What was the significance of his apparel? Why was the sculpture made? When was it made?

It is reasonable to assume that this man was not a deity but a human being. The realism of the face—and the fact that the face is the only very realistic part of the figure—suggests that it is a portrait. The fineness of the carving and the elaborate regalia indicate that the sitter was a man of position and power. Heizer (1962: 312) and Bernal (1969: 89–90) suggest that Olmec chieftains were first and foremost priests in a theocracy. Coe (1968: 110) opts for a more secular social structure

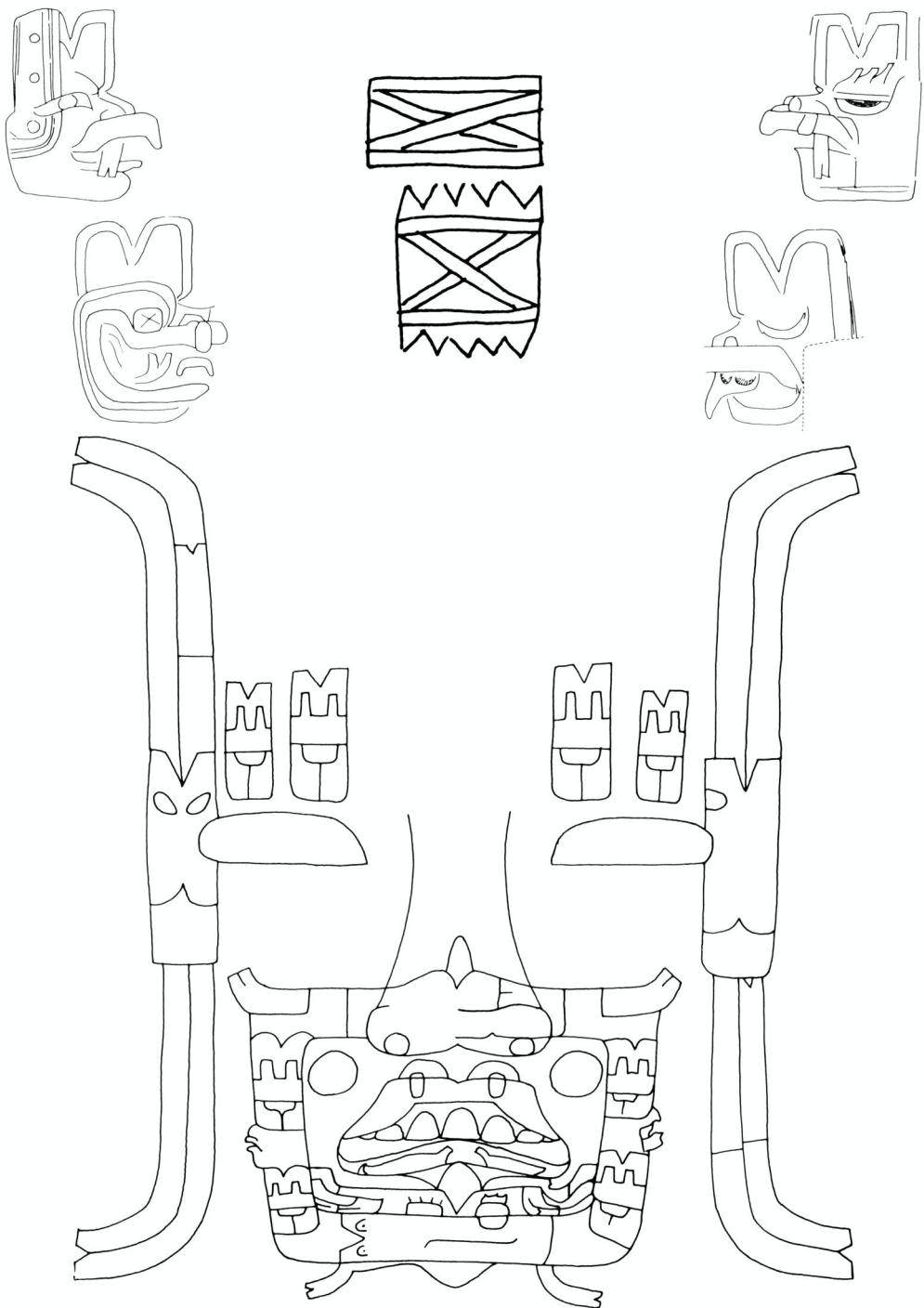


Fig. 43 Designs on figure from Las Limas. After Coe 1968: 115 and Joralemon 1971: Fig. 10. (See also Medellín Zenil 1965: Bernal and Groth 1968: Pl. 7.)

with great civil lords or royal lineages. The question of how separate church and state were in Olmec times is a complex one. The very fact that this figure of a particular man was carved indicates his individual importance. On the other hand, he is outfitted with symbols that must have had religious or magic significance and power.

If one were making guesses about the significance of the garments the figure is wearing, one might start by following Coe's suggestion (personal communication) that the were-jaguar was a sign of kingship or power, and read the mask on the front of the headdress extension as a sort of royal crown proclaiming authority. It is also possible that it indicates that the figure was under the protection of a were-jaguar deity. The four masks on the helmet band below, if they are four aspects of the same god, may indicate the protection of this deity or dedication to him or may signify that this particular deity was the patron of a certain occasion. If it is true that the cleft/vertical-bar/four-dots/downturned-E complex is specifically associated with La Venta, then the mask on the back of the headdress may be a heraldic device telling something about lineage or the terms of power, signifying that the man came from the royal house of La Venta, or that he was under the sovereignty, or represented the sovereignty, of La Venta. In any case, one finds on the figure a number of elements associated with La Venta and combinations of motifs found also on objects from La Venta.

The Dumbarton Oaks figure has particularly strong bird associations. Bird and jaguar motifs are, of course, common in Olmec art, and are often associated (Bernal 1969: 99), but the Dumbarton Oaks figure has more than a common quantity of bird associations: not only the feather cape with bird tail, and the hatching that may represent feathers, but also the large number of birdheads. Although birdheads much like these appear on two La Venta ear ornaments and as part of a rather abstract design on two or three incised objects, they are rare on other Olmec stone objects. That they appear with such frequency on this figure is remarkable. The "birdness" of this man's accoutre-

ments might suggest a special closeness to a bird-associated deity or a particular bird-associated occasion, or possibly attributes as a leader or warrior (the knuckledusters might strengthen this association). On the other hand, jaguar associations are not particularly strong, unless one reads the cleft elements simply as symbols for jaguar. Also notably lacking are serpent-related motifs, with the exception of the crossed-bands motif.

There is a frequent appearance on the figure of four elements, usually with an additional central element: e.g., the four leaf-shaped elements with the central "egg" on the front headdress-extension mask; the four masks with the central "eye" on the helmet; the four vertical panels on the belt and on the kilt, each of the two groups having a central horizontal rectangle; the four circles with the central vertical bar on the back of the headdress extension. Most of these can also, of course, be read in terms of five, if the central element is included. To this list of five one can add the five panels on the tail and the five rows of wavy lines on the back of the cape. There are also groups of four without the central element: the birdheads incised on the cape; the rectangles formed by the cleft at the back of the head; two bars above the birdheads at either side of the face; the two groups of four bars on the belt; the wrappings on the arms and legs; and perhaps the four prongs on the downturned E on the back of the headdress extension. One might also include the four cleft elements, two on each ear protector. Three is also a notable number, though to a lesser extent. There are three finials on the headdress extension, three bands in the bindings on the arms and legs, three eyes with three brackets on either side. To try to interpret such numerology may be nonsense, or may simply be a matter of esthetics—at the very least it makes for symmetry and is diagnostic for the Olmec style—but it is also very likely that these numbers and combinations were meaningful to the Olmec in terms of deity manifestations, world directions, etc.

One thing that has become clear to me in making this study is that Olmec motifs should probably be read as basically simple elements which can be put

together in rather flexible systems. There is an interchangeability about Olmec motifs (as is apparent in the cleft/vertical-bar/four-dots/downturned-E complex), and, in fact, the Olmec rarely use exactly the same complex of motifs twice. But there are certain elements that seem to be used together in certain patterns with some frequency, and there are certain rules guiding the interchangeability (for example, the crossed-bands motif does not appear in direct association with the cleft/vertical-bar/four-dots/downturned-E complex).

The use of these elements suggests a form of rudimentary writing, in which perhaps the same element may have different meanings or different elements may have the same meaning. The cleft, for example, is an extraordinarily versatile element, used everywhere and on everything, from head to foot. It is shown with or without a face, and with a variety of infixes or appendages (one of the unusual aspects of the Dumbarton Oaks piece is the use of a cleft with a dual or triple form below it). The crossed-bands motif is used not only in different positions, but is perhaps also used in portions, i.e., the diagonal bands used separately; possibly the lozenges at the bottom of the La Venta mosaic pavements (Fig. 35) may be a variation of the band motif. On the other hand, forms could apparently be substituted for one another in what is essentially the same context, as the four circular elements with the vertical rectangle.

It is tempting to try to make some correlation between kinds of objects and kinds of persons represented. The colossal heads appear to be portraits, as do the major figures on stelae. Masks seem to run the gamut from portraiture to were-jaguar representations. Small standing figurines are usually generalized and impersonal, and more or less jaguar. Seated figures in the round—whether monuments or figurines—are probably more frequently portraits than not. In this regard, the Dumbarton Oaks figure falls within the conventional canon.

Another interesting speculation revolves around the rather curious distinction between the simple dress of most figures in the round and the much more elaborate

garb of figures on stelae and celts. What is the reason for this distinction? All Olmec figures must represent someone important, someone with secular-sacred power. The nude figures, or the figures in loin-cloths, were certainly not simple slaves who dragged the colossal-head boulders down from the mountains. The time, energy, skill, and precious material spent on them precludes this idea. But, if they are powerful people, why are they not shown in full regalia? Does their nudity have something to do with being represented at a moment of purification or dedication? Is it conceivable that figures in the round were sometimes dressed like dolls, perhaps in feather capes and head-dresses? One could not, of course, do this with low-relief or incised figures; the clothing would have to be carved on. This is an idea that is foreign to our concept of the Olmec, and yet it is a possible functional reason for this difference in the two kinds of sculpture.

Whatever the reasons, the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure is, in this respect, different from the usual type of sculpture in the round. The fact that it is richly bedecked may indicate that it is late enough to reflect a change in tradition or perhaps a regional difference. But the motifs are generally so close to those found at La Venta that there could hardly be great temporal or regional differences. The time of carving would appear to be during the La Venta period (say, 800–400 B.C.) rather than San Lorenzo, both because it is “jade,” which is absent at San Lorenzo, and because of the close resemblances between the style of Arroyo Pesquero as a whole and the La Venta offerings.

As far as I can determine, this was one of only a few figurines found in the Arroyo Pesquero cache, and the others were simpler. In other words, this appears to be the only elaborately dressed, elaborately made figurine from the cache, or, at most, one of a very few. A number of celts were found; however, celts are generally abundant in Olmec offerings. One might imagine this figure at the head of a scene with celts placed around it, somewhat like Offering No. 4 at La Venta. But a number of masks were also found here and it is hard to place them in this imagined complex. This man is not doing anything; he holds no jaguar baby

nor ceremonial bar; he does not sit like a wrestler; he does not carry a torch and knuckleduster. He is perhaps holding court—or simply sitting for his portrait. It is a young face; was this piece perhaps made on the occasion of his accession to power? Was the chieftain giving himself symbolically in an offering? Was the cache a dedicatory offering or a burial or did it have both aspects? Only when we understand better the Olmec penchant for burying things can we know why this piece was made.

#### AN UNPUBLISHED OLMEC FIGURE AT DUMBARTON OAKS WITH RELATED MOTIFS

THERE IS a small jade Olmec half-figure (Figs. 44 and 46), of unknown provenience, in the Dumbarton Oaks Collections, a figure that was long ago broken at the waist; only the upper portion remains. The piece measures 7.5 centimeters high by 5.1 centimeters wide by 3.9 centimeters in depth. It was presumably a standing figure. The disproportionately short upper arms are close to the sides of the chest, and the lower arms, also disproportionately short, extend forward at a right angle; the fists are held downward. There are large drill pits in the arm pits, smaller ones at the corners of the mouth, and a drilling into each side of the ears; the ears are rectangles in high relief. The eyes are made up of three drill pits. The figure has a cleft head, with the cleft at a right angle to the face.

There is no indication of clothing, but there is fairly elaborate incising on the face. There are two profile faces incised on each cheek, and these are related in a punning way to the major face. The major face has a cleft element incised over each brow, forming eye plaques; this element becomes the cleft head of the larger profile face on each cheek. The eye of the major face is the eye of this profile face. The nose of the profile face is a line incised along the nose of the major face (these two parallel lines come to the inside of the eye of the major face and form a vertical panel down the center of the major face). The mouth of the major face is, in profile, the mouth of the profile face, and becomes a squared mouth because there is a vertical line going from the level of the bottom of the nose of the major face and turning at a right angle to the nose. In one section, this is a double line because there is a line from the chin of the major face to the center of the eye.

Just in front of the ear of the major face is another, smaller profile. The eye of this profile is formed by the ear drilling of the major face; the mouth and nose are incised, and the brow is formed by a line going up to



Fig. 44 Jade figurine. Dumbarton Oaks Collections.

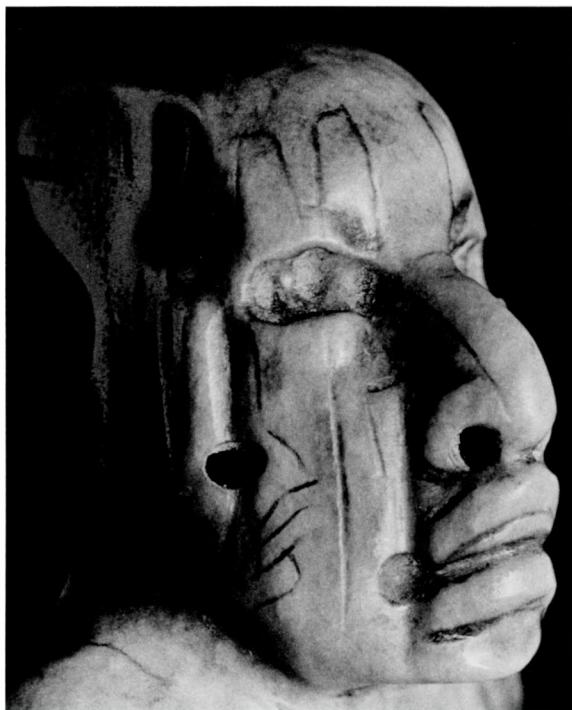


Fig. 45 Profile view of the head.

the outer edge of the eye of the major face. The space described by this line and the vertical rectangle of the ear of the major face suggests a cleft head for the profile face. Moreover, this line is picked up on the other side of the eye of the major face by the outer line of the cleft-element eye plaque, so that this line and the line that comes to the center of the eye of the major face make a vertical panel down the cheek of the major face, in which the smaller profile is enclosed.

This piece is notable for the strength of the face, its vitality and monumentality despite its small size. It is also particularly interesting because of the above-described incising, with its double-entendre images, the sort of visual punning that is found on certain other Olmec objects. The Necaxa figure (Covarrubias 1957:78) has a profile incised on the cheek. A head from Chiapas (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Fig. 36d) has a profile in front of the ear of the main face. A small, cleft-headed profile also appears on the cheek

of a face incised on a celt found in La Venta Offering No. 2 (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959: Fig. 35e; Joralemon 1971: Fig. 175), and the pectoral (Fig. 32) with a cleft-headed profile face has two facing profiles, rather complicatedly constructed, and with another profile on top of the head, sharing the cleft of the main face.

This punning with line is not found on the Dumbarton Oaks seated figure, but the half figure and the seated figure do share certain motifs. Both figures have the cleft head at a right angle to the face. The line at a right angle to the nose on the half figure is reminiscent of the mask on the front of the headdress extension. There are further similarities with the masks on the helmet band. Cleft elements as eye plaques appear both on the half figure and on the right-hand helmet mask on the seated figure. The idea of vertical zones on the face appears both on the half-figure and on the two central helmet masks.



Fig. 46 View showing the other side of the face and the cleft head.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**BELTRAN, ALBERTO**  
 1965 Reportaje gráfico del hallazgo de Las Limas. *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 21, pp. 9-16. Mexico.

**BERNAL, IGNACIO**  
 1969 The Olmec World. (Translated by Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas.) University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

**BERNAL, IGNACIO, and IRMGARD GROTH**  
 1968 Ancient Mexico in Colour. New York.

**BOGGS, STANLEY H.**  
 1950 "Olmec" Pictographs in the Las Victorias Group, Chalchuapa Archaeological Zone, El Salvador. *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology*, vol. IV, no. 99. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Cambridge.

**BUSHNELL, GEOFFREY H. S.**  
 1964 An Olmec Jade Formerly Belonging to Alfred Maudslay. In XXXV Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Actas y Memorias, vol. I, pp. 541-542. Mexico.

**CERVANTES, MA. ANTONIETA**  
 1969 Dos elementos de uso ritual en el arte olmeca. *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, 1967-1968, séptima época, tomo I, pp. 37-51. Mexico.

**CLEWLLOW, C. WILLIAM, JR.**  
 1968 Comparación de dos extraordinarios monumentos olmecas. *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 34, pp. 37-41. Mexico.  
 1970 Comparison of Two Unusual Olmec Monuments. *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, no. 8, pp. 35-40. Berkeley.

**CLEWLLOW, C. WILLIAM, JR., and CHRISTOPHER R. CORSON**  
 1968 Appendix II: New Stone Monuments from La Venta, 1968. *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, no. 5, pp. 171-182. Berkeley.

**CLEWLLOW, C. WILLIAM, JR., R. A. COWAN, J. F. O'CONNELL, and C. BENEMANN**  
 1967 Colossal Heads of the Olmec Culture. *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, no. 4. Berkeley.

**COE, MICHAEL D.**  
 1965 The Olmec Style and its Distributions. In *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, pp. 739-775. University of Texas Press, Austin.  
 1966 An Early Stone Pectoral from Southeastern Mexico. *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, no. 1. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington.  
 1968 America's First Civilization. New York and Washington.

**COVARRUBIAS, MIGUEL**  
 1942 Origen y Desarrollo del Estilo Artístico "Olmeca." In *Mayas y Olmecas, Segunda Reunión de Mesa Redonda Sobre Problemas Antropológicos de México y Centro América*, pp. 46-49. Tuxtla Gutiérrez.  
 1946 Mexico South, The Isthmus of Tehuantepec. New York.  
 1957 Indian Art of Mexico and Central America. New York.

**DRUCKER, PHILIP**  
 1952 La Venta, Tabasco: a Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 153*. Washington.

**DRUCKER, PHILIP, R. F. HEIZER, and R. J. SQUIER**  
 1959 Excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, 1955. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 170*. Washington.

**FRANCO C., JOSÉ LUIS**  
 1959 La Escritura y los Códices. In *Esplendor del México Antiguo*, pp. 361-378. Mexico.

**GROVE, DAVID C.**  
 1970 The Olmec Paintings of Oxtotitlan Cave, Guerrero, Mexico. *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, no. 6. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington.

**HEIZER, ROBERT F.**  
 1962 The Possible Sociopolitical Structure of the La Venta Olmecs. In *Akten des 34. Internationalen Amerikanistenkongresses*, Vienna 1960, pp. 310-317. Horn-Vienna.  
 1967 Analysis of Two Low Relief Sculptures from La Venta. *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility*, no. 3, pp. 25-55. Berkeley.

**HEIZER, ROBERT F., P. DRUCKER, and J. A. GRAHAM**  
 1968 Investigaciones de 1967 y 1968 en La Venta. *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 33, pp. 21-28. Mexico.

**JORALEMON, PETER DAVID**  
 1970 A Study of Olmec Iconography. *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, no. 7. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington.

**KUBLER, GEORGE**  
 1962 The Art and Architecture of Ancient America. Baltimore.

**MEDELLÍN ZENIL, ALFONSO**  
 1965 La escultura de las Limas. *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 21, pp. 5-8. Mexico.  
 1968 El dios jaguar de San Martín. *Boletín del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia*, no. 33, pp. 9-16. Mexico.

**PIÑA CHAN, ROMAN, and LUIS COVARRUBIAS**  
 1964 El Pueblo del Jaguar. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico.

**SHOOK, EDWIN M.**

1956 An Olmec Sculpture from Guatemala. *Archaeology*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 260-262. Brattleboro.

**STIRLING, MATTHEW W.**

1943 Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 138*. Washington.

1955 Stone Monuments of the Río Chiquito, Veracruz, Mexico. *Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 157*. Washington.

1961 The Olmecs, Artists in Jade. In *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* (S. K. Lothrop, ed.), pp. 43-59. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

1965 Monumental Sculpture of Southern Veracruz and Tabasco. In *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, pp. 716-738. University of Texas Press, Austin.

